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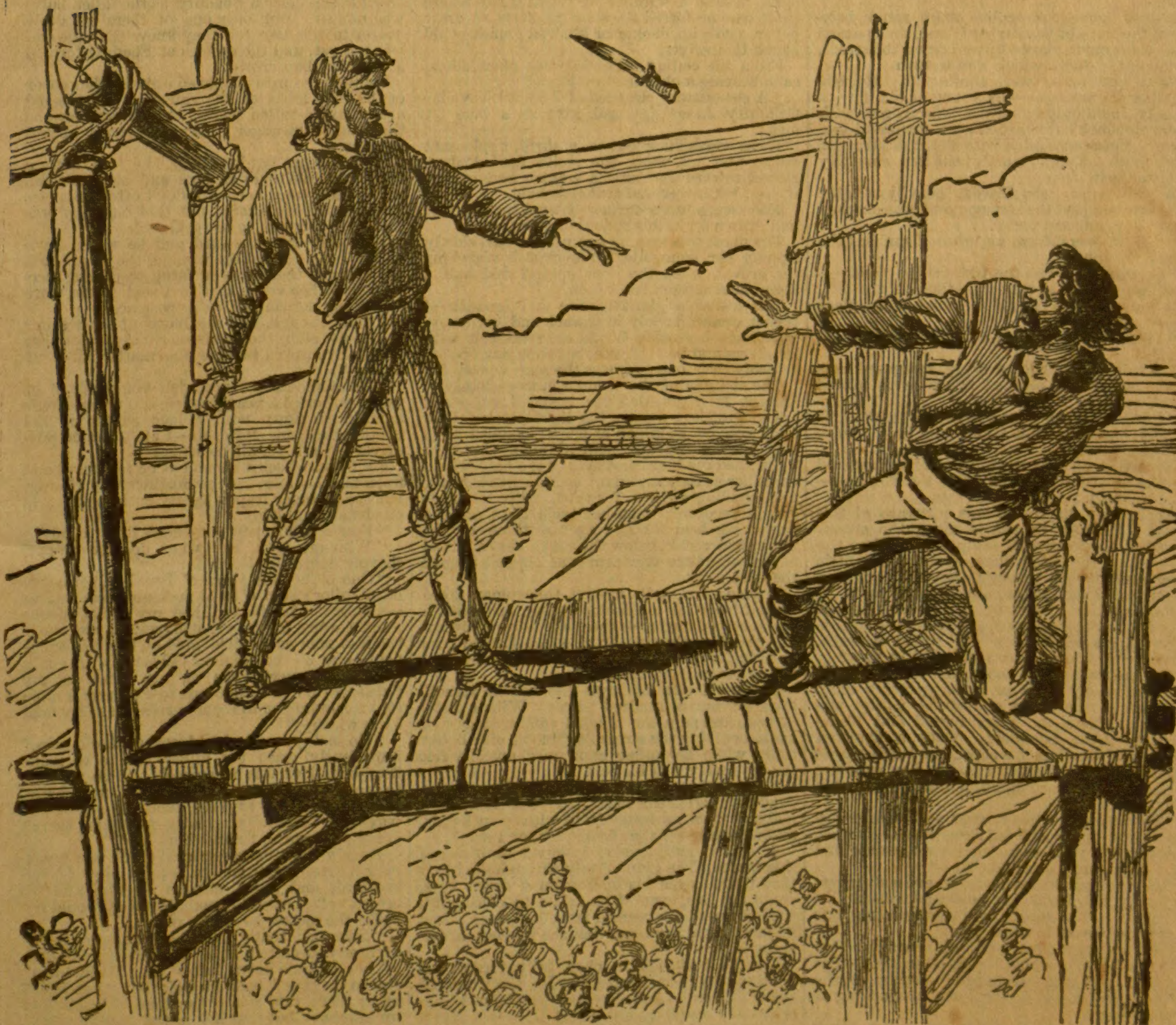
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SOL SCOTT, THE MASKED MINER; or, DAN BROWN'S DOUBLE.

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"JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," ETC., ETC.



WITH A HOWL OF DESPAIR, VERNON SHADUTE LEAPED BACK AND CROUCHED DOWN UPON THE VERY EDGE OF THE PLATFORM.

Sol Scott, THE MASKED MINER; OR, DAN BROWN'S DOUBLE.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "ALABAMA JOE," "DAN BROWN OF
DENVER," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BEAUTY ON A "BENDER."

THE "city" of Golconda was both alive and a lively place—this much was freely acknowledged by her silver rivals lying to her right and her left. True, some of them added that the name adopted was somewhat bombastic and not exactly appropriate, since the only diamonds dealt with in this New World Golconda were all of the same shape and color, and of much greater value to the Knights of the Field of Green, than to reputable lapidaries. Good Golcondans never noticed this vile calumny, or if so, laughed at it. Slander helps change many a town into a city, and so their little "boom" went steadily on.

There is a strong family resemblance between all mining towns where the precious metals are wrested from the bosom of mother earth. The day is devoted to work, the night to pleasure—a grim sort of pleasure that too often resulted in "a man for breakfast." Yet the contrast was less startling in Golconda than in the placer towns of a generation ago. All day long was the clattering of machinery and the ponderous strokes of the mighty "stamps" used to pulverize the silver-bearing quartz. The earth rumbled and quaked again as the charges of giant powder exploded in its bowels. Cars loaded with quartz creaked along tramways, or mule teams passed from pit to mill. But Golconda was not fairly awake until midnight. To use the vernacular, then she was red-hot, and just boiling over with fun.

It was thus on the night when this chronicle opens—a night long to be remembered in the annals of Golconda—near the middle of July, 1878.

A dark figure in masculine attire, ran lightly down the steps of the Parker House, then paused and cast a quick glance up and down the street, as though in doubt which way to turn.

Stars and moon were shining brightly, but whether the stranger was young or old, fair or homely, could only be surmised, for a light cloak and a slouched hat shielded both form and features. Yet not satisfied with this, the stranger drew forth a flexible mask of silk and carefully adjusted it in place.

A tall, square-shouldered, heavily-bearded man brushed past the stranger, but was checked by a clear, musical voice:

"Sir, can you inform me where I can find the Dew Drop Inn?"

"Certainly. Cross the foot-bridge yonder—that lamp stands at this end—turn to the left, and you will see a red globe. That is the place you want."

"Thanks—and pardon for having troubled you."

The tall man made no reply, but gazed earnestly after the cloaked figure as it moved rapidly away.

"I've heard that voice before—but where? It sounds like—bah! Sol Scott, old boy, you're growing looney!"

Nevertheless, so powerfully was he impressed that he turned and glided after the stranger—unconsciously rushing on his fate.

Apparently the mask was unaware of this espial. Rapidly he passed along the street, reaching the designated lamp that marked the east end of the foot-bridge spanning the little river that flowed through the valley, cutting the city of Golconda into almost equal parts.

Nearing the center, he paused and leaned over the low railing, gazing through the eyelet-holes of his mask upon the water beneath. Here the stream was deep and swiftly flowing. A few hundred yards below, the black surface was broken by spots of foam, growing more frequent as the lower end of the valley was neared. There the river roared and hissed through great boulders. Once a drunken sailor, dare-devil in his cups, on a small wager attempted to shoot those rapids. The splinters of his boat were seen again, but the man or his body, never.

"That would be the shortest and easiest way out of the darkness," fell slowly from his lips. "A gasp or two—then those rocks would end all. And it may come to that—"

"Begging pardon, sir, but you are a stranger, and may not know how old and rotten this railing is. If it should give way beneath your weight, salt wouldn't save you!"

With a start the mask turned around and beheld the tall man whom he had addressed before the hotel, standing within arm's-length; yet the echoing bridge had given forth no warning of his approach.

The moonlight fell fairly upon the black mask, and its wearer saw the miner start in

surprise. A muttered word of thanks for the warning, then he turned and hurried over the bridge, not pausing again until beneath the red globe that shone like a fiery beacon before the door of the Dew Drop Inn.

A quick glance down the street failed to discover the miner, and then, after a moment's hesitation, the stranger pushed aside the door and entered.

A goodly number had already accepted the fancifully worded invitation to "drop in," for this establishment, run by Isaac Tampkin, Esquire, was the favorite resort of all possessing money and ability to "buck the tiger," or "throw themselves outside of" first-class—if price be the criterion—liquors.

A moment the stranger paused to cast a swift glance around the spacious room, as though in quest of some particular person, then passed up to the bar and ordered a lemonade.

The polite barkeeper—the redoubtable Isaac himself—stared at the stranger open-mouthed, as he noted the black mask; but only for a moment. Then he turned to the tools of his trade, a broad grin upon his not ill-looking face.

Never a man in Golconda had a keener eye for the fair sex than Isaac's, and that one glance told him that his customer was a woman! The garb was masculine, but could not wholly disguise the rounded outlines of a superb form. The breast was too full, the shoulders too sloping, the hips too swelling and the lithe waist too small.

"Some gal on the look-out fer her feller—an' means business, too, from that battery she's got slung to her middle!" Isaac thought, his eyes busy as his fingers.

The woman—for such the masked stranger undoubtedly was—did not notice the scrutiny of the curious Tampkin. Her eyes were wandering swiftly over each form in the room, now dwelling a moment as though the man she sought might possibly be in disguise.

The apartment was large and well fitted up. The moral laws of Golconda were not very rigid, and running a gambling hell was considered purely legitimate business.

There were three faro tables, each with its row of devotees; a roulette wheel, a monte bank, besides a number of round tables where those who preferred the solid comforts of draw poker, seven up, eucher or kindred games, could please themselves.

From the ceiling depended two chandeliers, each bearing a cluster of oil lamps.

"A she-critter! Durned ef I don't b'lieve it's Calamity Jane! Old gal, give us a buss fer luck!"

These words rung out in a shrill, unpleasant voice, and all, even the stolid faro dealers, looked toward the bar. A woman had rarely, if ever, before crossed that threshold.

None were more surprised than the one who had drawn forth this rude salutation.

The mask was leaning against the bar, slowly sipping her lemonade, her eyes still searching the crowd, when the door opened and half a dozen men entered the saloon.

The leader, a giant in size and breadth of frame, dressed rudely in flannel and corduroy, with huge horsehide boots; a broad belt with revolvers and bowie-knife; a slouch hat cocked rakishly over one eye, was the man who spoke.

The attitude of the woman, unconsciously to herself, fully revealed the rounded curves of her magnificent person, the light cloak falling back over her shoulder as her unoccupied hand rested upon her hip, arm akimbo. An ugly light filled the bloodshot eyes of the half-drunk miner as they rested upon that superb shape, and striding swiftly forward, with the rude speech recorded, he pushed aside the glass and thrust his bearded lips against those of the mask, just visible below the silken shield. And at the same time one arm was slipped around the lithe waist.

With a swift, agile motion, the woman freed herself from his loathsome grasp, then, with a sharp cry of anger, as the giant moved toward her, she flung the glass from which she had been drinking, with all the force of her nervous arm, full in the ruffian's face.

Fairly between his eyes the missile struck, breaking into a hundred pieces. With a howl of rage and pain the blinded ruffian staggered back, brushing the streaming blood and liquor aside, while his other hand mechanically felt for the revolver in his belt.

"Attempt to draw that pistol and you are a dead cur!" cried the mask, her voice clear as a bell and stern as fate. "Up with your hands, and apologize for that foul insult, or I fire!"

A cocked and leveled revolver emphasized this speech. The giant, dimly through the blood that flowed over his eyes from a dozen cuts, could see this, even if he failed to distinguish the hot fire that streamed from her eyes. And he knew from her tones that she was not threatening idly.

Yet he hesitated to obey fully, though his hand moved from his pistol. He, the "cock of the walk," as he had so often proclaimed himself, to be cowed by a woman! It was a bitter pill, and one he could not swallow. Better risk a shot, by a sudden attack, even though he knew

a victory over a woman would bring a dozen quarrels upon him; for there were men present.

Several men impulsively moved forward to interfere, but one who came from outside was quicker than the rest. A strong hand closed with a vise-like gripe upon the ruffian's neck, and a stern voice cried:

"You overgrown brute, don't you hear the lady? Down upon your knees and beg her pardon, like the craven-hearted cur you are!"

A foot struck his feet dextrously from under him, bringing the giant upon his marrow-bones before the mask, while that firm grasp upon his neck kept him from falling over.

A snarling curse parted his lips, and snatching the bowie-knife from his belt, the giant made a vicious thrust at his assailant.

A swift, snake-like twist of the body alone saved the man who had termed himself Sol Scott from the gleaming steel. As it was the keen weapon slit open his flannel shirt and left a red line across his stomach.

A dexterous dart of his left hand, and the giant uttered a howl of fierce rage, not unmixed with pain and wonder, for his wrist was wrenched terribly and the knife torn from his grasp. A thud followed—the deadly weapon buried its point in the ceiling and hung there quivering.

"Never hit a man when he's down! Up, you lummock, and face the music!" cried Sol Scott, with a cold, hard laugh.

The spectators could scarcely believe their eyes, and the nearly sobered giant was probably the most surprised, as Sol Scott raised him from his knees with one hand, twisting him around until they stood face to face, then drew back his free hand.

Instinctively the giant tried to put up his hands as he lurched forward, but his antagonist would not be denied. With terrific force the clinched hand shot forward and landed fairly between his eyes. A bloody spray followed that wonderful stroke, and the huge carcass, raised clear of the floor, fell headlong among his astonished mate with a jar that shook the entire building.

An enthusiastic cheer arose at this display of power, for the majority of those present felt no love for big Vernon Shadutz, as the fallen bully was named. But only one of them all drew nearer to the bar, for they knew that the end was not yet, and the cronies of Shadutz formed a "mighty bad crowd."

Sol Scott seemed unmoved alike by that cheer or the ugly looks of the ruffians who gathered around their fallen leader, but turned toward the masked stranger in whose defense he had interfered.

"I ask your pardon, lady," he said, with a frank bow, his tones as cool and even as when he first addressed her. "I don't often interfere in other people's affairs, but that big bully was just drunk enough to be reckless."

"Another step forward and he would have tasted lead," replied the woman, the words bold enough, but there was a faint trembling perceptible in her voice, that told such scenes were something new in her life experience.

"True enough, but the blood of such a cur should not stain the hands of a lady. For that reason I ventured to take the matter off your hands."

"An' a monstrous neat job you made of it, pardner!" cried a hearty voice, and the speaker's hand came down with a loud smack on Sol Scott's shoulder. "No, sir—I ain't lost no pile-driver—thank ye, all the same!"

Sol Scott wheeled around as he felt that hand upon his shoulder, his fists instinctively closing, but the stranger leaped lightly back, holding up one hand laughingly.

"Flag o' truce, pardner—don't hit a fri'nd!" "Who are you, and what do you want?" sharply demanded Scott.

"One o' the lost sheep o' Israel—a perambulating tailor's sign o' hard luck an' short rations—a duke in disguise ef I hed my rights, mebbe—but I won't lie to ye, stranger. I was one o' the fust men as cradled gold on this yer continent—one o' the 'riginal '49-ers; an' I got a 'scription paper home at my hotel, in my Saratogy, fer to raise funds to construct a monstrous monument to them heroes—one of whom I am which—"

"Go soak your head and sober off, old man," impatiently cried the miner, unable to make head or tail of this rigmarole. "I've no time to spend in foolishness. If you want a drink, ask for it at my expense, then get out of the way—for, unless I'm greatly mistaken, there's going to be warm times before long."

He saw that the red-shirted giant was beginning to recover from the fearful blow he had received, and knew enough of him and his crowd to feel tolerably confident they would not suffer the matter to rest as it was.

"Stranger, that's jest what brung me here," earnestly declared the veteran gold-digger. "They told me down below that I'd find more fun to the squar' inch in Golcondy, then in any other place this side o' the land o' brimstone an' sulphur—but that lick is the fust glimpse o' fun I've see'd yit. Good Lord! what a forti' you could make ef you could only hire out as a

quartz-crusher! Forty-stamp power in them yer piston-rods o' yourn, I reckon!"

"Stand aside, or you may get more fun than you can carry. Lady, if you would be so kind as to retire—this is no place for you—"

"And leave you alone to suffer for my folly—no!"

The words rung out sharply, and were emphasized by the actions of the mask. With a revolver in each hand, cocked and ready for use, she stepped forward and stood beside Sol Scott. A woman of no common courage was this.

Whatever Scott may have felt, he knew there was no time to parley with this willful beauty. Vernon Shadutz was once more upon his feet, all the more dangerous from his silence and the deliberation of his movements.

All in the saloon saw that worse was to come, and those nearest the door began to edge their way outside, eyes fixed upon the rival forces, ready to dodge if any stray lead came in their direction.

One of the most nervous was the worthy Isaac. Not only was his person in equal danger but his hardly acquired property must surely suffer in case of a pitched battle.

In desperation he snatched up a double-barreled shot-gun from underneath the bar, and raising both hammers, cried:

"Gents, I've been bust'ed up in business twice a'ready by free fights, an' durned ef I stand it any longer! The man as burns powder fust inside this ranch, 'll git a load o' buckshot, sure! Go outside an' amuse yourselves all you want, an' I'll never kick—but I do here!"

While speaking, Isaac turned the muzzle of his battery first toward one, then upon the other party, and all could see that he meant business.

"Durn a man that lets a few dollars stan' in the way of sech a heap o' fun!" cried a shrill voice, and as Tampkin glanced in that direction he saw that it was the old '49-er.

That worthy was sitting upon the counter, fronting the rival groups, but his right hand grasped a cocked revolver, the barrel resting upon his left arm, the muzzle staring Isaac full in the face.

"Barkeep," said the veteran in a cheerful tone, "go easy! Ef you crook your finger onto them triggers, thar'll be a funeral to-morrow, an' a auction sale in this here shebang, sure! Strike up the music, gents, an' let the fun begin. Funny Felix from Frisco—which is me—an' barkeep' here 'll see fa'r play!"

Tampkin saw that he could do nothing more. Did he attempt to turn his weapon upon the reckless veteran, a bullet would check the movement. The shot-gun dropped from his hands upon the bar, and with a howl of mingled fear and disgust, he dove under cover, to at least save his own bacon.

This bit of by-play had caused a temporary cessation of hostilities between the rival parties, though neither Sol Scott nor the mask whom he was risking his life in defense of, turned their eyes from the six ruffians before them.

Outwardly cool as an iceberg, Sol Scott covered his gigantic foe, and despite the rage that was consuming him, Vernon Shadutz saw that the miner held his life at command. Of desperate brute courage, he possessed more than an ordinary share, but even he hesitated to rush upon certain death.

Nor were his mates more ready. Four revolvers were bearing upon them. Swift as might be their onset, at least that many shots would be discharged, and at such close quarters each would almost surely reach its mark.

Sol Scott laughed mockingly as he noticed this faltering.

"Six to two, and one of those a woman! Bah! instead of men's clothes, you should wear coyote hides!"

"I'll tan your hide for a vest, Sol Scott!" snarled Vernon Shadutz, but not offering to advance.

"Don't you wish you may get it?" tauntingly laughed the other. "The buzzards will have a feast to-morrow—for you are not worthy other burial."

"Time, gents!" called out Funny Felix, squirming uneasily on his seat. "I'm jist starvin' to see some fun!"

"You'll get more fun than you want, as soon as we end these game-cocks!" growled Shadutz, with an ugly glance.

"One on 'em is only a pullet, ef she do kerry the gaffs," retorted the veteran, no whit disconcerted by the threat. "An' right thar, gents, eager as I be fer to see the fun, I moves a 'mendment. Gal critters like that ain't so plenty in these diggin's that we kin a'ford to waste 'em unnecessarily. Let her skin out, an' to keep the odds even, I'll take her place, I'm old an' mighty nigh wore out, but you'll find thar's a pizen lot o' fun wrapped up in my hide yit, ef I do say it."

"I ask no help," cried Scott, coldly. "Let the lady go, and I will fight the whole crowd single-handed."

"For me you got into this trouble—I will not flee and leave you to bear the brunt alone," said the mask, her voice firm and resolute. "It does not matter much to me—I have little to live for now. But for your sake, I regret—"

"We are fit allies, then," interposed the miner, a bitter cadence to his tones. "I don't value my life a farthing, but I'll fight hard before such curs can boast of rubbing me out."

Under ordinary circumstances such conversation would have been impossible, for men act swiftly when thirsting for each other's blood. But just now matters were at a dead-lock.

The ruffians feared to advance, retreat or make a single movement while those four pistols covered them, for they knew that such would prove the death of some of their number. So they were keenly watching for some favorable opening, in readiness to take instant advantage of it.

On the other hand, Sol Scott was seriously hampered by the presence of the masked woman. Had she been out of danger, had he been alone, with only his own life to guard, Funny Felix would have seen the "fun" begin, long since. For the miner spoke true when he said that he valued his life but lightly, and a more daring man never drew breath of life.

Tampkin, encouraged by the delay, peered out from under the bar, but the veteran seemed to have eyes all over him, and one glimpse of his leveled pistol was enough to send the worthy Isaac once more to cover.

"Spit it out, gents," added Felix from Frisco, nodding toward Shadutz and his men. "Shall the lady take a back seat while this chicken dances to your music instead?"

Shadutz gave a surly growl that might have been taken either for assent or refusal, and Funny Felix chose to interpret it to suit himself. He slid from the bar, with a shrill crow of delight, but the woman made no effort to retreat. Instead, words dropped in a soft whisper from her lips:

"Look out—they mean mischief—see his eyes!"

The tall miner made no reply, but he too had seen the quick glance of intelligence which passed between the party. He feared that danger was drawing near from behind, but he never removed his gaze from the inflamed face of the giant. To do so would be fatal, as he knew right well.

The first notes of the horned owl echoed through the room.

At the same moment, two chairs whirled through the air and striking the two chandeliers, broke the lamps and extinguished the lights in an instant.

Several swift flashes light up the gloom, only to render the darkness the more intense. Shouts, curses and angry yells were mingled with the heavy trampling of feet.

Bewildered and terror-stricken the spectators flocked to the door, crushing down that frail barrier in their mad haste to escape the storm of bullets which they felt must follow.

And high above all arose the piercing scream of a woman!

CHAPTER II.

WAS SHE MISTAKEN?

BOTH the masked woman and Sol Scott drew trigger the instant the lights were extinguished, and it was the red glare of these shots that momentarily lighted up the scene. By it they saw that their lead had been wasted, Vernon Shadutz and his backers having leaped swiftly aside and were now crouching low down, about to leap upon the twain.

That woman's scream, thrilling all who were within hearing, came from the mask, as strong arms clasped her form, raising her from the floor as though her weight was but that of a feather. Her first belief was that the red-haired, evil-eyed giant had clutched her, and in desperation she strove to raise a pistol against either him or herself, she cared little which, just then. But something struck her elbow sharply, and the weapon was knocked from her hand. Then that wild, piercing cry—and her senses reeled.

That strong arm belonged to Sol Scott. By the sulphurous light he saw that the odds were all against them, hampered as he was, but he resolved at all hazards to save the woman in whom he felt such a powerful interest, questionable though her actions had thus far been.

Quick as thought, he thrust one pistol into his bosom, then fung an arm around the woman, raising her to his shoulder as he leaped swiftly toward the door.

None too soon. He heard the heavy trampling as Vernon Shadutz and his comrades in evil rushed forward, thinking their revenge sure, and even felt the wind of their passage. It was the arm of the chief ruffian that knocked the pistol from the hand of the mask, thus saving either her life or that of her bold defender.

The yelling, cursing, panic-stricken crowd had not yet cleared the door when Sol Scott burst upon them, but the vigorous impulse of his broad shoulders, aided by hand and foot, neither of which he spared, quickly removed the temporary blockade, and still bearing the mask upon his left arm, the miner rushed across the street where the light from the red globe could not reach him.

A swift glance backward failed to reveal any

pursuers, and a low, mocking laugh burst from his lips.

"Kilkenny cats over again, from the howling they keep up in yonder! Only for her, I wouldn't ask any better fun than to have stayed in the game and stirred them up a little. Vern Shadutz has run the town long enough—"

A faint struggle on the part of the woman brought his brief soliloquy to an abrupt close. He released his grasp and allowed her to lean against the side of the building.

"You are safe enough for the present, lady," he said, and there was an unusual softness in his tones as he spoke. "Those curs are biting and snarling at each other in there still, but they must soon find out that we have given them the slip. For your sake, perhaps we had better increase our distance."

"I have troubled you enough—by my folly I have already made you bitter enemies—"

"Not if you mean Vern Shadutz and his hard crowd, lady. A collision between us was only a question of time. Ha! they have discovered their mistake!"

As he spoke, the red-haired giant plunged through the doorway and glared furiously up and down the street, revolver in hand.

"Keep under cover of the shadow, and hasten back to the hotel, lady," muttered Scott, the red light of battle filling his eyes. "Even if they should discover you, not a finger shall touch your person while I breathe."

"What would you do?" and the little hand of the masked woman closed upon the sinewy arm of the miner.

"That rascal and his gang are looking for me, and I never yet willingly disappointed an enemy."

"Surely you cannot display less courtesy toward a friend? You call me lady, despite my unwomanly conduct; then, as a lady, I ask you to guard me safely back to the hotel."

Softly the words were uttered; an appealing light shone forth from the holes in the mask. Few men could have resisted such an appeal, and Sol Scott was no misogynist.

"Your request is a command, lady," he said, gallantly.

"It was once, but now—"

The softly breathed sentence ended with a sigh, and Sol Scott felt the hand that clasped his own tremble. But he did not care to speak just then. Somehow the welfare of this strange woman seemed very precious to him, and from cover of the shadows he could see Shadutz and his comrades in evil glaring about in quest of them, pouring curses and fierce questions upon the scattered crowd.

Swiftly and silently they glided along under the shadow unnoted by the infuriated ruffians beyond. They turned the corner, crossed the bridge and were soon at the foot of the broad flight of steps leading up to the hotel entrance.

"You are safe now, lady," said Scott, pausing. "In the garments more suitable for your sex than these, there is no danger of your being recognized, or if you are, D. W. Winkle is not the man to suffer his fair guest to come to harm."

But the mask showed no intention of taking the hint. Instead, her fingers closed more firmly upon his arm, and there was a ring almost of command in her voice, as she spoke:

"We will not part just yet, if you please, sir. We must come to a perfect understanding some day, and there is no better time than the present."

The miner gazed curiously into her eyes for a moment, then quietly yielded. The mask ran lightly up the steps, passed through the office, then up a second flight of stairs.

Sol Scott nodded shortly to the landlord, who stared open-mouthed after him as he followed the mask up-stairs.

The strange woman opened a door, and motioned the miner to enter. He obeyed, finding himself in a comfortably furnished private parlor. The mask followed, and as she closed the door, he heard the key turn in the lock. A glance showed him that she had withdrawn the key, but he said nothing.

"Wait here for me," the mask said, her voice sounding cold and even stern. "I will not detain you long."

Sol Scott smiled queerly and shrugged his shoulders as the strange woman passed into an inner chamber and closed the door behind her.

"Not so much danger of a love scene, after all," he muttered, leisurely scanning his surroundings. "Yet I could swear that I have heard her voice before, and not so many days since, either. Well, the dear creatures must be humored. Give her time and she'll show her hand, no doubt."

He was not kept long in suspense. In less than ten minutes the inner door opened, and a glorious vision of grace and beauty stood before him.

Tall and stately, with a figure that was almost perfection in its contour; a face that was rarely beautiful; eyes large, dark, and lustrous as diamond dust; a complexion of dazzling purity, with a soft flush upon either cheek—little wonder that the roughly-clad miner rose from his seat with an ejaculation of surprise.

The woman smiled; but it was a cold, chilling gleam. And there was a bitter, almost contemptuous ring to her voice as she spoke:

"Have I not fallen terribly low? To act as a spy upon my husband—the man whom I so fondly vowed to love, honor and obey?" and the woman ended with a bitter laugh.

"No doubt you believe you have good reasons for your actions," said Scott, speaking slowly, although carefully choosing his words. "And yet, it does not seem possible that *your* husband could give you cause for doubt."

"A very neat compliment, Mr.— by what name do you choose to be addressed, just at present?"

"Sol Scott will serve all purposes, I reckon," was the cool response. "It is short and easily spoken."

"And quite as much yours as that of Dan Brown, no doubt."

"Precisely as much, madam," smiled the miner.

"Then you acknowledge that your rightful name is not, never was, Dan Brown?" demanded the lady, her cheeks glowing vividly, but the rest of her face pale as a corpse.

"I do, cheerfully. Will you kindly tell me when I ever laid claim to that name?" coolly asked the miner.

"When you swore that I was all in all to you—when you vowed that you loved me and me alone—when you married me!" exclaimed the woman, her eyes flashing as though on fire.

Sol Scott smiled faintly, and then brushed one hand across his eyes as though he would clear his vision. There was no levity, no carelessness in his voice now as he spoke:

"I uttered those words—I recorded those vows—but it was years ago—when you were but a child, lady. I once had a wife—as fair and beautiful as you—but she is dead."

"I have nothing to do with the past. The present is black and bitter enough, God knows!" uttered the woman, passionately, advancing until within arm's-length of the miner.

At the sound of her voice, the face of Sol Scott once more grew composed, as impenetrable as that of a sphinx.

"No doubt this little drama would be interesting to me, lady, were you to give me the proper cues. As it is, I am wholly in the dark, and in all politeness allow me to ask, what on earth have I to do with your domestic troubles?"

The woman gazed into his eyes with burning intensity; but if she hoped to read any confession of weakness there, she was doomed to disappointment. Steadily her gaze was returned. The miner even smiled until his white teeth were visible under his heavy, drooping mustache.

"Do you know, I am powerfully tempted to kill you as you stand mocking at me?" cried the beautiful fury, plucking a long, slender dagger from her bosom and flashing it dangerously near the face of the miner.

Not a muscle flinched, nor did that baffling smile fade away.

"Your eyes would tell me as much, even if your lips had not. Death from so fair a hand could not be unpleasant, and as I have no particular longing for life, suppose you try it?"

Had he flinched, or attempted to reason with her, in all probability the maddened woman would have put her threat into execution, and driven the keen blade to its haft in his breast. Did he know this, or was he really so careless of death?

With a gasping sob, she flung the dagger aside, and sinking upon the sofa, sobbed bitterly as she covered her eyes.

Sol Scott looked down upon her for a moment, with a strangely softened look in his eyes, then stooped and gently laid his hand upon her shoulder.

It was an unfortunate movement if he meant to soothe her. With an angry cry, she sprang to her feet, burning rage quickly drying the moisture in her eyes.

"You dare to touch me—*you!*" she gasped, almost choking.

"It was a liberty, I admit," was the calm response, "but time is passing, and I left some friends back yonder who will be impatient if I keep them waiting longer. Yet I could not bear to leave you without a warning, uttered as a true friend."

"I am confident that you meant no harm, by your actions to-night, but, lady, never attempt such masquerading again. You heard the name that brute called you—Calamity Jane. His inference was natural enough. You were in a garb foreign to your sex, drinking at a bar in a public saloon and gambling hell."

The woman started back, her face flushing hotly. But the miner coolly continued:

"I claim to be a tolerable judge of human nature, but even I was deceived at first. I believed you were some such creature as the real Calamity Jane."

"Yet you endangered your life to protect me from further insult!" murmured the woman, visibly softened.

"Because you were a woman, lost and abandoned though I believed you—wrongfully, as I now know. Not one of those present but what believed you the same as I. And from this fact,

comes the warning I would give you. Remember that if a woman's fair fame is once besmirched, even if only in seeming, it never shines perfectly clear again."

There was a brief silence, then Sol Scott laughed softly.

"Pardon me, lady—I could not help it. A sinner lecturing a saint! But for the time I forgot who and what I am."

"Shall I tell you who you are?" the fire again leaping into her eyes, as she moved closer to the miner.

"If it will be any comfort to you, I don't mind," coolly.

"The man whom I once believed to be my husband!"

"I could wish your words were as true as you think them, lady," was the earnest response.

"For my sake, if not yours. I know your husband, by reputation at least. He is an honest man, one who has no reason for hiding his face or his real name from the pure light of day."

A short mocking laugh checked his speech.

"You are as modest as you are truthful! See! how easy it is to unmask you—"

With a swift motion her fingers twined themselves in his long, heavy, tawny beard, and pulled sharply. A cry of astonishment burst from her lips, and her face grew ashy pale as the luxuriant hair refused to come away.

Quietly Sol Scott bore the infliction, and smiled broadly at the discomfiture of his fair antagonist.

"You took me for your husband, in disguise? I fear the worthy detective would not think your mistake a compliment to him, if ever he comes to know me as I am."

"You are—you must be Dan Brown!" gasped the bewildered woman. "I could not have made such a mistake!"

"Lady, calm yourself and listen to me. I tell you now, as I said before, I am not Dan Brown, nor am I your husband. Instead, I am one whom he is hunting down—whom he has sworn to bring to the gallows—a blood-stained criminal!"

The woman stared at him in mute amazement. Not yet could she believe that all her instincts were at fault—that this man was a stranger, and not the one whom she had loved dearly enough to call husband. It was incredible! Surely there was some cunning legerdemain in all this!

"You still doubt me, I see," added Sol Scott. "I have confessed myself a criminal—have told you that human blood has stained my hands, and that the officers of justice are on my track, bounding me to the gallows. Are you wise in still disbelieving me—you, a peri in beauty—a woman for whom a man might well barter his very soul? Lady, it is an awful temptation for one to forswear oneself!"

Calm though his tones were, there was a burning light in his big blue eyes that caused the bewildered woman to shrink away from him as her pale face grew paler.

Instantly that glowing light softened, and with a low, soft laugh, Sol Scott resumed:

"Pardon me, lady, for my presumption, but I could not help reading you a little lesson in prudence. With such a glorious temptation, few men could resist a claim such as you have put forth."

"I do not know what to think!" murmured the wretched woman, sinking upon the sofa and pressing both hands to her brow.

"Your brain is disturbed by the scenes you have witnessed. In the morning all will be clear. Then, if you wish it, you can see me again. Ask for Sol Scott. Any one will know me by that name, and your message will find me. In the broad light of day, you will see how different I am from your husband."

As the miner seemed about to take his leave, the lady arose and drew the key from her pocket.

"You intend returning to that saloon?" she asked.

"Certainly. I shall be expected, and as I have little else to lose, I don't care about being deemed a coward."

"If you are the man whom I have called husband—as I must still believe—I know how unbending is your will when once it is formed. Yet I wish you would not go there."

"If I were your husband, your will should be my law; but unfortunately I am only Sol Scott, a hunted criminal."

"Then flee while you can!" impulsively cried the woman. "My brain is all in a whirl. I can hardly think. It may be that I am mistaken—that you are what you say. If so, save yourself by speedy flight, for if Dan Brown has sworn to hunt you down, nothing else can save you!"

"For years I have fled, driven from State to State, but I have turned my back on the blood-hounds of the law for the last time. Life has little attraction for me now. Blood calls for blood, and I am ready to pay the penalty. Tell your husband when you see him, that he will find the game he is looking for by seeking out Sol Scott."

Gently he took the key from her hands, unlocked the door and disappeared. The woman

sunk down upon the sofa, a sobbing moan bursting from her lips.

"Can I be mistaken? Surely that man is my husband!"

CHAPTER III

"FUNNY FELIX, FROM FRISCO."

"THINGS looked boom'n' fer a spell, but whar did it all go to? Whar is the fun? Whar is the cold meat fer breakfast? Ain't any—an' yit, it them good old days 'round Hangtown, Gouge-eye or Dead Dog, many the time hev I see'd a less promisin' prospect pan out fun an' stiff 'uns enough to run a crowner's mill fer a week, tail on end! Things ain't as they was then—more's the pity!"

Of course it was the old '49-er speaking, and he relapsed into silence with a sigh that seemed to come up from the very soles of his boots, as he leaned against the bar and gazed owlishly into the clouded countenance of Isaac Tampkin.

Time was money to a saloon-keeper in Golconda after the sun set, and the doughty Isaac, though not wholly recovered from his panic, quickly had his place put in running order again, after Shadutz and his crowd left it in search of Sol Scott and his masked companion.

Not much harm had been done beyond shattering the lamp-bearing chandeliers. No shots had been fired after the first volley discharged by Scott and company. Those four bullets formed a line in the end wall; thanks to the swift movements of Shadutz and his crowd no blood had been shed. They saw what no one else noticed: that two friends were preparing to break the dead-lock. They knew that Scott would shoot on the instant, and as the chairs whirled through the air, they ducked low down and let the bullets pass harmlessly over their heads.

"They's only two bright specks in the hull fizzle," resumed the veteran gold-hunter, as Tampkin only scowled sullenly:

"Them was the love tap that two-legged quartz-crusher lent the raw-head-an'-bloody-bones, an' the cute way in which you ducked under the bar an' drew in your head every time you ketch'd me a-p'intin' my shooter at ye. 'Twas ekil to a big mud turtle—"

"What in blazes do you want around here, anyhow?" sourly demanded Tampkin, his red face turning redder as he caught the low laugh among his patrons whose attention was attracted by the shrill, high-pitched voice of Funny Felix, from Frisco. "For two cents I'd come out and mop the floor with your karkidge, ef only to pay you fer pullin' on me when I wasn't lookin'!"

"Take out your change, Johnny!" chuckled the veteran, tossing a twenty dollar gold piece upon the counter. "It's bin a heap o' time sense I was used as a mop, an' mebbe I'm gettin' kind o' old fer brisk work like that, but I reckon thar'll be two cents wuth o' fun into it, anyway. File out, Johnny! Spit onto your han's an' ketch holt. Yar's your old mop, an' yar's your flo—the sooner ye git to work, the sooner ye'll git your house-cleanin' done!"

With a shrill crow that would not have disgraced a prize chanticler, Funny Felix from Frisco flung his battered hat upon the floor and rubbed his weather-beaten hands together in high glee at the prospect of some genuine fun.

The laughing crowd gathered around, and began offering extravagant odds on the fantastic stranger. Many of them were those who had nearly broken their necks in clearing the saloon when bullets bid fair to begin to play, but they anticipated no such danger now. This old man was either drunk or crazy.

So the saloon-keeper had thought at first; a half-drunken bummer such as all mining towns are infested with. But this belief was shaken by the gold produced so carelessly, and as he ran his eyes over the capering veteran, Tampkin began to think a mop not so readily handled, after all.

The fellow was tall, well-built save for a decided stoop of his shoulders, and the agility of his motions as he danced around his old hat, showed plainly that old age had not seriously stiffened his joints. His hair and beard, rough and tousled, of a sandy hue originally, was now a foxy gray. His garments were well worn, even ragged in places, but the knife and revolvers supported by the belt around his waist, were kept in perfect order and were such as no man need be ashamed to own.

"Johnny, fer the love o' fun den't say you're weakenin'—that your sand is gone back onto you—*don't!* I come yer fer fun—all the way from Frisco, gents. It's my daily bread—all that keeps me from leavin' this world an' 'tirin' to a convent fer to become a nun."

"Go easy, old man," said a stern voice as a new-comer pushed his way through the ring. "Take a night-cap, then go home and go to bed, or you may find yourself in the jug, before morning."

The spectators gave way, for Sam Ellis, city marshal of Golconda, was a well-known character whom few men cared to take liberties with. Even Funny Felix rapidly "simmered down," as he recognized the officer.

"'Twas a squar' barg'in, boss," he said picking up his old hat and carefully brushing it as he

grinned sheepishly at the marshal. "Johnny, yender, 'lowed ef I'd give him two cents, he'd mop up the hull floor with my old clothes, an' I jes' tuck him up at his offer."

"Johnny would make more money fooling around the butt end of a young earthquake, unless I miss my guess," said Ellis with a grim smile.

"Don't give me away, boss, or I'll never git no fun in this yer diggings," uttered Felix in a theatrical whisper; then advancing to the bar, he thrust his hand across it.

"Shake, young man. Fer all I've did, I heartily ax your pardon, an' ef I spiled your fun a bit ago, I'm ready to make amends by payin' fer all the damage done by them cusses. Ain't that fair?"

Tampkin gingerly accepted the proffered hand, but immediately wished he had refused, as he felt the bones fairly giving way beneath the terrible pressure of those sinewy fingers. Funny Felix did not appear to notice his contortions, but called out in his shrill, peculiar tones:

"Gents, all hands promenade to the bar, an' dome proud by helpin' tie my night-cap fer me!"

Save the dealers at the gambling tables, who perform must keep their brains cool, and two other men, the entire company advanced with alacrity to accept the frank invitation. The keen eye of Funny Felix noted these exceptions.

"Gents, you hearn my invite? Won't you honor us?"

"Thanks; we are temperance apostles and never indulge," one of the two men responded, barely glancing toward the veteran, then resuming his conversation in low tones.

"No loss without some gain—it's a half a dollar saved, any way," coolly uttered the old '49 er, turning to the bar.

The drinks were swallowed and paid for, then, after putting a few questions to Tampkin concerning the affray, the marshal insisted on Funny Felix's bearing him company home.

Meanwhile the two men who had claimed to be temperance apostles, seated at a table in the further corner of the room, were conversing in guarded tones, on matters which nearly concerned at least one of the characters introduced to the reader.

"I tell you I cannot be mistaken," repeated the man who had answered Funny Felix. "I have known the fellow for years; have worked in the same cases with him, and can penetrate any disguise he may assume at a glance. The fellow you call Sol Scott is none other than Dan Brown, the so-called famous Rocky Mountain detective."

The speaker, who, together with his present companion, was destined to figure prominently in events which were to astound Golconda and its surroundings, was a short, heavily built man, apparently near the middle age of life. His skin was dark and swarthy, his face heavily bearded, his black hair long and curling to his broad shoulders. His features, such as were not masked by hair, were regular and handsome. His eyes were brilliant and steady in their glances. His muscular form was clad in rather flashy garments, his linen white and well starched, diamond studs sparkling in the front.

From his dress and general appearance, he might have passed for any thing from a prosperous gambler to a retired merchant or capitalist.

He had arrived in Golconda but a short time before, registering at the Parker House as Paul Gerux of New York.

Plainly his companion was a less favored son of fortune. Of middle age or past, as his bushy gray hair and long beard indicated, his dress was worn and soiled as though its wearer had more than once slept in the gutter. His form, as well as could be told while sitting bent over the table, was good, tall and muscular, his face not unhandsome, his big blue eyes bright and shrewd, when not bleared and bloodshot with bad whisky.

A "bad egg" the more reputable citizens of Golconda had long since set against the name of King Carmichael. Not that any crime or especial sins could be laid at his door. He was always hail-fellow-well-met. But he would work at mining only when the humor took him, soon quitting and loafing around saloons until both money and credit were gone.

Carmichael listened quietly to the words of Gerux, then said:

"There is a mistake somewhere. You say Dan Brown left Denver only a week ago?"

"One week yesterday. I saw him off, so am positive."

"And he had been in town—how long?"

"For a month, constantly. I met him nearly every day."

"Then you are barking up the wrong tree, so far as Sol Scott is concerned," was the quiet response. "To my positive knowledge, Sol Scott has been here, steadily at work, as overseer of the silver mine, 'Glory of Alabama,' for the past two months. But I don't ask you to take my word alone," and Carmichael made a quick, almost imperceptible gesture.

Keen eyes must have been watching them, for a rough-clad miner strolled carelessly toward them and paused beside the table.

"You called me, King?" he asked, in a low tone of voice.

"Yes. You know the fellow called Sol Scott? how long has he been bossing the 'Glory of Alabama'?"

"I hired out to him three months ago yesterday."

"How often and how long has he been absent during that time?"

"Not more than twice, and then only for a single day each time."

"That will do. Go, but keep an eye in this direction. I may want you again," said Carmichael, whose words were obeyed with an unquestioning promptness that might have opened the eyes of many in Golconda who looked upon him as a drunken, worthless "enemy to none save himself."

Carmichael made no comment on the information thus obtained, but slowly shuffled and dealt the cards which were used only as a cover to their conversation.

"There may be a mistake, but if so, I have not made it," doggedly muttered Paul Gerux. "The man you call Sol Scott is none other than Dan Brown. You have been deceived by some cunning trick—he is wily as a fox and sure as death. He has played some 'double' on you, to throw you off your guard and enable him to work under cover. He has sworn to run you to earth, and he will keep his oath unless you get in the first blow. It is your life or his, for once on the right scent, as he surely is now, death alone can choke him off."

"I don't see how Sol Scott can possibly be our man; but if he is, our work may be done for us easier than you think," said Carmichael, as the door opened and Vernon Shadutz with his "hard crowd" blustered into the room, after a vain search for the man who had knocked him down.

"You know the fellow, then? Can money buy him?" eagerly asked the Frenchman, his black eyes glittering.

"Better than I do you. Of one thing be sure. Either Sol Scott or yonder giant, Vernon Shadutz, will be ready for a coffin before another sun sets. Shadutz has ruled here too long as cock of the walk, for him to overlook that blow."

"Unless he strikes from behind, or shoots without warning, your big friend will lead the mourners, then?" said Gerux, grimly. "I hate Dan Brown as the devil hates holy water, but I never yet saw his equal at fighting, from naked fists up."

"Well, I'll not shed many tears, whichever goes under. Shadutz has been growing more troublesome—Is that drunken fool bent on suicide?" he exclaimed in amazement.

It was Funny Felix from Frisco who drew forth this uncomplimentary ejaculation.

By some means he had eluded the city marshal, and returned to the saloon, entering close upon the heels of the "bad crowd."

With characteristic impudence he approached Shadutz, and clapped him on the shoulder, saying cordially:

"Stranger, come an' hi'st some p'izen. I owe ye as much, fer I hedn't see'd a smell o' fun fer a month until you—"

"Clear out, you drunken cur!" growled the bloody-faced ruffian, raising his fist, threateningly.

Funny Felix leaped back out of reach, then laughed shrilly as he leaned carelessly against the bar.

"No 'pulsion, stranger. Ef you won't drink I won't hev the liquor to pay fer. Mebbe you're right. Whisky is powerful bad fer black eyes—an' a neater lookin' pa'r then them o' yours I never saw! Fresh beef is good—better go home an' poultice 'em!"

The battered giant glared at the audacious veteran like a mad bull that first catches sight of the red flag. Then he took one stride forward with a deep curse—only to pause as quickly, for a cocked revolver was staring him full in the face.

"You're powerful good-lookin', old man, but you can't come in yer," said Felix, squinting along the leveled tube with a coolness doubly provoking. "I'm mighty fond o' fun, but I don't want no brick house fallin' on top o' me—not much!"

Once more there was an instinctive scattering on the part of those gathered around the card tables, but this time their haste was needless. The giant, mad as he was, was no fool. He saw that the supposed drunken bummer was a man of nerve; who could not be rushed over with impunity. The cool, quaint smile, as Funny Felix squinted over his revolver, plainly told him this much. Before he could touch a weapon, or close his mighty grasp upon his antagonist, a bullet would find a lodging-place in his brain.

With a hoarse, forced laugh, his raised fist was lowered and unclenched, and he said, speaking slowly:

"Some other time will do just as well, old man. You've got the drop on me now, and I don't hold my life as exactly my own, while that cursed coward, Sol Scott, walks the earth."

"Jest as you say, stranger," was the cool re-

sponse, as Funny Felix lowered his weapon, though still keeping it cocked and in his hand. "I ain't the man to force fun onto a feller when he ain't feelin' like laughin'. But I'm sorry. I hoped we was goin' to have a little jamboree all to ourselves. Say!" he added, as a brilliant idea seemed to strike him. "You couldn't make b'lieve I was that feller you call Sol Scott, could you?"

Shadutz stared at him with an ugly scowl, but said nothing.

"Mebbe ef I was to sorter stir you up—call you a cold water drinker, or a honest gentleman, or some other sich insult—wouldn't that help to fetch about some feelin's o' fun in ye?"

The sublime impudence of Funny Felix produced an effect exactly contrary to that intended, and Shadutz fairly laughed aloud.

"I'm afraid you're too heavy for me, stranger," he said, with a smile that was even more repulsive than his frown. "My quarrel is not with you, as I said before. But don't try to rub it in. I'm not always in a good humor."

"I was never known to crowd a stranger, an' so I won't try to tickle you any more," frankly said Felix, putting up his weapon. "But mebbe some one o' your crowd would like to play circus fer awhile—jist to please the gents lookin' on. I'm old an' purty nigh wore out, but I'll do my best to make it interestin'."

A tall, athletic young fellow stepped forward.

"I don't mind trying a fall, just for luck," he said, smiling. "That is, if you can wrestle a bit."

"Never tried it sense I used to wrestle with my gal, an' then she throwed me, every clip; but anythin' fer fun," grinned Felix. "It's a squar' thing—no double bankin'!"

"There's gentlemen enough around to insure fair play," replied the young miner, and an eager murmur, accompanied by sundry significant clicks as revolvers were drawn to full cock, bore out this assertion. "Catch as catch can, if you don't object."

"Durn the odds, so long as thar's any fun into it," responded the veteran, removing his belt and laying it upon the counter.

Eagerly bets were offered, but without takers. The odds were all on the side of the young miner, well known as a good wrestler.

Funny Felix only smiled as he heard the general opinion.

"Whenever you're ready, say so, boy," he exclaimed.

"I'm ready any time," smiled the wrestler.

Just how it was done, nobody could tell. There was a swift rush, a momentary struggle, then the young miner was hurled headlong over the bar into the pile of glasses and bottles!

"Look out thar! you'll bu'st somethin'—durn sech a keerless feller, anyhow!" shouted Funny Felix, grinning.

At that moment a sharp voice shouted aloud the warning:

"Look out, Shadutz! there comes Sol Scott!"

CHAPTER IV.

A DUEL IN THE AIR.

VERNON SHADUTZ, in common with all the rest, had become wholly absorbed in the meeting between Funny Felix from Frisco and the young wrestler. Nothing strange in this, for the red-haired giant called the young athlete brother—Rucker Shadutz. But as that warning cry rung out clear and startling, he whirled around to face the door, by which alone his enemy could enter.

Swiftly the crowd scattered, falling back on either hand, leaving Vernon Shadutz and his four companions standing alone with no one between them and the door, where stood Sol Scott, each hand claspng a revolver butt, thumb on hammer and forefinger on trigger. Cool and careless as he seemed, none present but knew he meant business and would make things lively if the "hard crowd" dared press upon him.

"All at once, boys," growled Shadutz, intense hatred distorting his badly battered countenance. "He can't fire more than one shot, and that will be at me—rub him out!"

The delay was only momentary, but it was long enough to put a new phase on matters, and somewhat equalize the long odds against Sol Scott.

Quick as a flash, at the first alarm, Funny Felix leaped to where his pistol-belt was lying, hastily buckled it around his waist, then dodged past Shadutz and his fellow-ruffians, wheeling midway between them and Sol Scott.

"It's clean ag'inst my principles to spile sport, gents, but when five overgrown roosters all pitch onto one little chicken, an' he with spurs not more'n a foot long—why that's too much fun, an' my stomach cain't stand it."

"Run over the crazy fool!" growled Shadutz. "Cut him down if he hasn't sense enough to get out of the road."

"Some o' you'll run ag'inst a snag an' bu'st your b'ilers, sure, a-tryin' of that on," coolly retorted Funny Felix, never flinching a hair's breadth. "I'd never stop a fight whar the odds was anythin' like level—"

"But I will, as long as I am marshal of this city!" thundered the voice of Sam Ellis, brushing past Sol Scott and taking a position from

whence his pistol could cover both parties. "Put up your weapons, gentlemen. If there's powder to be burnt to-night, I'm going to have the first squib!"

Vernon Shadutz was the first to obey this significant order, by replacing his revolver, and some there were looking on who secretly believed he was not greatly disappointed by the abrupt entrance of the marshal.

"A cheap way to gain a reputation for courage, Sol Scott!" he sneered. "Almost any cur would put on a bold front, when backed up by Sam Ellis."

"You see, Mr. Ellis, what a false position your interference places me in," coldly uttered Sol Scott, turning to the officer. "Not that I mind what that overgrown bully says, but there may be some honest men present who may think the same—that I only returned here because I knew you were at my back. Oblige me by retiring, and let us have it out."

The marshal shook his head, his stern countenance not relaxing.

"Then you place me under the disagreeable necessity of begging the name and address of one who will act as your friend, pointedly observed Sol Scott, cool as an iceberg.

To say the worthy marshal was astonished, is to put the case very mildly indeed. He had interfered on behalf of one man who was threatened by half a dozen—for by this time the discomfited wrestler had recovered his wits sufficiently to range himself alongside his brother—and now, in return for saving him from almost certain death, that man was coolly challenging him to mortal combat!

"For the love o' humanity, boss, don't bust the circus up altogether," pleaded Funny Felix, pathetically. "Repeated disa'p'tments on sech a tender p'int 'll surely send me into a decline—"

"The calaboose, more likely," bluntly interposed the marshal.

Then turning again to Sol Scott, he said:

"I cannot answer your last speech just at present, because I am on duty; so let that rest for the present. Will you kindly explain why you think I should withdraw? What is the quarrel between you and big Shadutz?"

"A natural curiosity to see which of us shall reign chief of the town," carelessly replied the miner.

"Don't you swaller that, boss!" cried Funny Felix, earnestly. "A gal-critter slamanaded in yer, dressed out as a he-man, an' was enjoyin' of herself all alone, when purty black eyes, yender, pranced up to her an' smacked her right on the gob. 'Course she busted her glass in his face, an' then this gent, yer, he made old brick-top git down on his hunkers and ax pardon—"

A savage growl from Shadutz as he started toward the veteran with clenched fists, cut short the valuable account, and Funny Felix whirled about, hands up in good shape, by no means anxious to avoid the angry giant. But Ellis motioned Shadutz back with a significant look not to be mistaken.

"You're none too good for it, even if it isn't true," he said, then turned again to Sol Scott. "You are determined to have it out with them, Mr. Scott?"

"Certainly; Shadutz bears my mark, and he isn't the kind of animal that forgets easily. We must come together sometime—provided he couldn't slip in a stroke when my back was turned—and now is good as any other."

"Your quarrel is with him alone, then?"

"Well, he is the one I mean to mark first, but I'm not particular as to one or two more or less. They run together, and form such a sweet scented crowd that it would be a pity to scatter them now. The six will make about an average man, and I'm willing to take them in a lump."

There was a cool, careless insolence in the words and tone of the speaker that electrified the crowd and almost maddened Vernon Shadutz.

"Yer's yaller dust as says he kin do it, too!" squealed Funny Felix, whipping forth a heavy bag of buckskin. "But you ain't a hog, mate," he added, coaxingly, addressing Scott. "You're willin' to 'vide up with a fri'nd, ain't ye? Thar's jest three apiece fer us, an' you kin take your pick, too. Then the boss, thar', kin give the word, an' ef we two can't tickle all the fun out o' that crowd, then I'll jine the church an' never no more play circus ag'in!"

"Simmer down, old man," retorted the marshal. "You've no call to put a finger in this pie. The quarrel lies between Scott and Shadutz, and if they choose to have it out now, there's enough of us here to see fair play. You smile, gentlemen," he added, a little sharply, addressing those among the crowd who were amused at the idea of a sworn guardian of the peace acting as referee in a duel, "but I don't see anything so funny in the matter. Blows had been struck and hard words passed. I could arrest them both and put them in the cooler, but what use? Sooner or later they must meet, and have it out—maybe where half a dozen better men might catch their stray lead. For that reason and that only, I prefer to let them fight it out now, when I can see that good order is kept. On this condition, gentlemen—that I

am to arrange the details—you can have your little amusement just as soon as you please."

"I am agreed," said Scott, quickly. "And, marshal, I ask your pardon for the hasty words I spoke a moment since."

"And you, Shadutz?" asked Ellis, after bowing to Scott.

"It would have been settled before now, only for your interference," was the sullen response, "but you've wasted too much time in talking. Look at my eyes—they are nearly blind, and full of bits of glass. Am I in condition to fight a duel? I can scarcely see across the room."

"Fight across a handkerchief, and there's no need of eyesight," coolly, and even contemptuously uttered Sol Scott.

"I want to kill you, but not bad enough to commit suicide," said Shadutz, with an angry scowl.

"Mr. Ellis, I will make one more suggestion. If that is refused by the other party, then I guess he is not very anxious to fight me. Fix a few boards on top of the windmill by the gulch for a platform. Put us up there, armed only with a knife each—or just as that fellow prefers. The moon gives light enough—everybody can see the fun, and at the same time be out of danger."

"That's better, and I'll agree—knives alone," eagerly cried Vernon Shadutz.

To do the ruffian justice, he was quite as anxious for the fray as was Sol Scott, but he spoke true when he said that his eyes were in no fit condition for fighting a duel with fire-arms. They had been injured by the glass which the masked woman had shattered in his face, and by no means bettered when Sol Scott dealt him that terrible "mule kick."

On a narrow stage, where dodging was out of the question, where the combatants must stand up breast to breast until the weaker gave way, his enormous strength must prevail. And then, too, he was an expert with the knife.

With difficulty he smothered a shout of exultation, lest Marshal Ellis, who he knew was no friend of his, should think the odds too great, and refuse to let the affair go on. The officer did look grave, but the proposition having come from Scott, he could make no objection without showing too plainly where his sympathy lay.

As already shown, the moral laws of Golconda, as is generally the case with young mining-towns, were not very rigidly enforced, and duels and street fights were no great rarity; but there was something original about this affair, and the outsiders were correspondingly elated.

Volunteers to arrange the platform were not lacking, and chief among them was Funny Felix, who took a strange interest in the affair. Plank, hammers and nails were procured, and the crowd moved quietly through the town, pausing just beyond the city limits where loomed up a massive structure, pyramidal in shape, the blunt apex surmounted by a round top of heavy timbers, some eight feet in diameter.

This was the frame of a windmill, as yet unfinished, and on this, when covered with planks, the air duel was to be fought.

"I'm gen'ally b'ilin' over with fun," said Felix, when the planks were firmly nailed in place, looking over the edge, "but while I hold my sober senses, you won't ketch me fightin' a man mountin' on no sech high-toned riggin' as this—not much! What life the knife leaves, them rocks down yonder 'll take p'izen nasty keer off!"

Thirty feet below, lying thickly on all sides, were rough boulders, a fall on which could hardly be other than certain death. Not far away, some twenty feet lower, ran the dark waters, breaking here and there into foam over a sunken rock.

Funny Felix descended and reported all in readiness.

"Gentlemen," said Ellis, addressing the duelists, "let one thing be understood. As marshal of this town, I mean to see that both of you have fair play. After the fight once begins, of course you each look out for yourselves, and any tricks you may see fit to use in gaining an advantage over the other, will be considered fair and part of the game. But until I give the signal, you are under my control, and sure as the moon shines down on us, I will kill the man who first breaks my orders."

"Now listen. You will each one be searched, to make sure that neither bears any concealed weapons or armor on his person. Then you will toss up for first choice of positions. The man who wins, will climb up there and selecting his side, stick his knife-point down in the planks, close to the edge. He will then come down, and the other man will do the same thing, only taking the opposite side."

"You will then be searched again, to make sure that no friend passes you another weapon. The man who won the toss will go up and stand in the center of the platform, facing his knife, holding both hands above his head. The other will mount and stand back to back, his hands also up. Then I will ask if you are ready. You will respond, and I will call time. The moment

that word is spoken, you are at liberty to leap for your weapons. But mind: if either of you tries to throw the other off, to trip him up or prevent his arming himself, before you secure your own knife, I swear to send a bullet through him the next moment! It is to be a fair knife duel, and the best man has got to win. Are you satisfied? Is there any point which I have stated that you don't fairly understand?"

"Nothing could be clearer, and I, for one, am perfectly satisfied," said Sol Scott, frankly.

"Me too," growled Shadutz, "but it seems to me you're taking a mighty roundabout way of getting us to work."

"You may thank your own hard reputation for that," coolly retorted Ellis, drawing forth a gold eagle. "Heads or tails, Shadutz? Call out while the coin is in the air."

"Heads!" cried the giant as the coin revolved swiftly over their heads, and fortune seemed to be smiling upon him.

"Heads it is, and you have first choice. Stand and let me search you," said the marshal, quickly assuring himself that the giant possessed no weapon save his long, heavy bowie-knife.

With a devilish laugh of anticipated triumph, Vernon Shadutz climbed up to the platform, chose the side where the moonlight would fall upon his back, stuck his knife into the plank, then descended. Sol Scott went through the same performance, and returned to the ground.

By this time Shadutz was re-searched, and five minutes later the two deadly enemies stood upon the platform, back to back, hands elevated above their heads, every muscle in readiness for a swift leap for the gleaming weapons the instant Marshal Ellis should utter the fated signal.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?" demanded Ellis, his revolver raised and covering the motionless duelists.

Promptly the answer came; clear and cold from the lips of Sol Scott; hoarse and vengeful from the red-haired giant.

A brief pause of suspense almost painful in its intensity, then:

"TIME!" thundered the marshal of Golconda.

One swift stride carried each duelist to where his knife stuck in the floor—at the same instant their fingers closed upon the handles—then a gasping cry came from the "bad crowd" that supported Vernon Shadutz, for they saw the knife slip from his fingers! In his haste to be first armed, he had not fairly grasped the handle!

A fierce curse from his lips as he turned to repel the expected attack; but the tall form of Sol Scott stood motionless. A cold laugh echoed through the night air, and he said, contemptuously:

"Pick up your knife, blunderer, and handle it more cleverly than that, or Satan will lose your earthly services forever!"

A chill of fear crept over the giant, and he involuntarily shuddered as he once more grasped his knife. This was no ordinary man against whom he had pitted himself, and for the first time he doubted the result of the duel.

He had little time for reflection, however. The moment he was armed and stood erect, Sol Scott strode forward and boldly attacked him in his own position.

"Two to one in hundreds onto Sol Scott!" enthusiastically cried Funny Felix, as those below noted this advantage gained.

"Drop that, old man!" cried Ellis, sternly. "No gambling on life and death while I'm around."

"You can't choke me off from seein' the fun, anyhow," grumbled the veteran '49 er. "An' sich fun—look at that!"

With a metallic clash the long, heavy knife-blades came together as Shadutz skillfully parried a blow that would otherwise have cleft his heart in twain. Sparks flew from the tempered steel. The duelists now stood with foot overlapping foot, breast to breast, their eyes glowing with bitter hatred into each other, each one sternly resolved to conquer or die!

Like statues they stood from the waist down. To retreat or be forced back meant death upon the rocks below. Rapidly their blows fell—swiftly thrusts were made—but each was parried. They were very skillful in the management of their blades, and the breathless spectators below thought them equally matched. But Shadutz knew better. There was a cold, devilish light in those blue eyes, a sneering smile that showed the white teeth through the tawny mustaches, that told him he was being played with, that his master stood before him!

The knowledge made him furious, and his gleaming blade was handled with redoubled force and fury. Slowly, inch by inch, Sol Scott slid backward, and from the lips of Rucker Shadutz, below, came a wild yell of triumph—but it found no echo in the heart of the madly fighting giant. That steady smile of cold derision and contempt told him that his antagonist was giving ground of his own free will.

"You were standing so near the edge I feared you would slip and hurt yourself on the rocks below," uttered Sol Scott, as calmly as though at play instead of being engaged in a duel that could end only in the death of one, if not both. "It would be a pity to rob those gentlemen of

their sport so soon—and your lesson has only begun!"

Calmly as he spoke, every word was audible to those below, and Vernon Shadutz uttered a hoarse snarl of rage at the wild cry that arose to his ears, for it told him how bitterly he was execrated by the great majority of the spectators.

Rucker Shadutz turned ghastly pale as he heard these words, and then his face took on such a desperate look that Funny Felix silently stole up close beside him.

"Now look to yourself, for I mean business!" cried Sol Scott.

Like lightning his weapon gleamed in the moonlight, and as Shadutz parried his thrusts and blows, a glittering wall of steel seemed to separate the antagonists. All the skill of the giant was now called into requisition to keep that flashing blade at bay, without making stroke or thrust in return. Great drops of sweat stood out on his brow. Strong as was his arm, he felt it beginning to tire. Lower and lower sunk his heart. He knew now that he had dared his doom where he counted victory assured beforehand.

"You are growing careless, fellow," said the tall miner, as the point of his blade shone red in the moonlight. "Are you tired of life that you blindly run against my blade?"

"Are you man or devil?" gasped the red-haired giant, dashing the sweat from his eyes and turning aside another vicious thrust.

"A man—and your master, dog!" cried Sol Scott, a low, mocking laugh following his words. "For months you have been a terror to all honest people in Gelconda, wearing the lion's skin. Now I strip it off, and reveal the masquerading ass!"

As he spoke, Sol Scott seemed to redouble the vigor of his assault, and then, with a sudden turn of his powerful wrist, he tore the knife from the giant's hand and sent it flashing like a meteor through the air, falling to the rocks where its metallic clink sounded like the death-knell of the defeated duelist.

With a hoarse howl of despair, Vernon Shadutz leaped back and crouched down upon the very edge of the platform, looking like some maddened wild beast at bay, rather than a human being.

"Say your prayers, Vernon Shadutz!" cried Sol Scott, in a cold, measured tone. "The devil your master has deserted you in your time of need. The innocent blood you have shed, calls out loudly for vengeance! Say your prayers, dog!"

Intense was the horror of Rucker Shadutz as he saw his brother disarmed, for, evil though they both were, blood-stained with many an atrocious murder, the same mother bore them, and their love for each other was strong and fierce. He knew that such an act, though it might save his brother, would surely doom him to death at the hands of an enraged mob, yet he leveled his revolver and took a swift aim at Sol Scott—then pulled trigger!

CHAPTER V.

BOTH VICTOR AND VANQUISHED.

SHARPLY the pistol report rung out, but the bullet whistled through the night air wide of its intended victim.

Funny Felix from Frisco, reading aright the desperate look upon the face of Rucker Shadutz, knocked up his pistol hand, then, with a power no whit inferior to that which had, an hour before, laid the elder brother low, his hard fist struck the would-be assassin beneath the ear, knocking him headlong a dozen feet away.

"Durn a critter so p'izen mean as to want to stop sech ge-lorious fun as them!" the veteran snorted in hot indignation.

"Who fired that shot and what at?" sharply demanded Sam Ellis.

"That dirty cuss yender. He pulled on Sol Scott up thar—"

"Lynch him! Throw him over into the drink!" cried several voices in high anger, for just now the tall miner was in great favor, thanks to the lesson he was reading the giant, disliked and feared by nearly every man present.

"I'll see that he don't give any more trouble," said Ellis, producing a pair of handcuffs and snapping them on the wrists of the fallen wrestler, senseless from the combined effects of that heavy blow and his headlong fall upon the rocks.

His mates said nothing, loud-mouthed though they usually were. They knew that a single spark might bring about a serious explosion. The crowd around him were ripe for it.

All this transpired very rapidly, and the echoes of the treacherous shot had hardly died away before all eyes were once more riveted upon the duelists, with breathless eagerness for the end.

It surely was nigh. The red-haired giant was unarmed, and his enormous strength could avail him nothing against the blood-tinged knife in the hands of Sol Scott. A single stroke—a death yell—a fall through space upon the rocks below.

A painful shrill ran over the spectators as they saw Sol Scott draw back his right hand,

the moonbeams gleaming athwart the daintily balanced steel. The victor was no fool. He meant to end the matter without again trusting himself within arm's-length of his adversary. It could be easily done. At that short distance, his strong arm could hurl the heavy bowie knife with force sufficient to split the skull of the giant, thick as that might be, and so swiftly that to elude the missile would be utterly impossible.

As the crowd below thought, so believed the defeated duelist, and bent on revenge even in death, he prepared to leap upon his terrible adversary knowing that, even if death-stricken midway, let him once grapple with his destroyer, both must fall from the narrow platform upon the ready rocks far below.

Once more that cold, mocking laugh, as though Sol Scott possessed the power to read the thoughts of his antagonist, and knew that they were fated never to be realized. And then the knife was cast—gleaming through the moonlight like a silver wheel as it turned over and over in swift revolutions.

Cries of astonishment came from below—the excited crowd could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes.

Instead of piercing the brain or heart of Vernon Shadutz, the bowie knife was hurled high into the air, descending swiftly and burying itself forever with a sullen *chug* in the dark waters of the little river!

"A good blade once, but it was stained with the blood of a cowardly cur, and would soil my hand were I to use it again!"

Cold and biting came these insulting words, and half-stupefied by the strange action, yet feeling as a great criminal must when the suffocating noose is removed from his throat by a reprieve, Vernon Shadutz rose erect and the duelists once more stood face to face.

"A dozen times to-night have I given you your life, Vernon Shadutz," said Sol Scott, his voice ringing out clearly. "Not through any love for you, nor yet compassion on your crime laden soul, but to make you feel all the bitterness of death, time and again—to show you that, feared bully, fighting man and fire-eater as you are, you are but a bungler in the hands of a man!"

"You haven't rubbed me out—maybe the crow of triumph will come from the other side, after all!" hoarsely growled Shadutz.

He was not averse to this delay. His strength and wind had both been severely tested, and every moment he was growing more fit for the death-grapple which he knew must come. He no longer underestimated his antagonist. Unless Sol Scott was far more than an ordinary man, he would never have voluntarily disarmed himself. Yet the subtle tricks of fence and pugilistic skill could avail him little now. There was no spare footing for attack and retreat, no chance to avoid punishment by superior agility. They must stand face to face, foot overlapping foot, and give and take, or else grapple and trust all to mere strength and endurance.

"Come!" sharply uttered Sol Scott. "Toe the mark—hand to hand, breast to breast—and I will finish the little lesson I set out to give you. I could have slain you as you crouched there like a wild beast, trembling with terror, but I ask odd of no man—much less a cowardly ruffian like Vernon Shadutz!"

He stood with his foot upon the center crack of the little platform. Shadutz hesitated a moment, meditating a fierce rush that might force his taunting enemy over backward before he could deal a blow; but the risk was too great. By nimbly stepping aside and tripping him or delivering another of those lightning blows, Sol Scott might easily reverse the programme.

"Your stomach turned already?" mocked the tall miner. "Then down upon your knees and abjectly apologize for having wantonly insulted a lady as far above you as heaven is above hell! Swear that you will leave this part of the country, never to return again under penalty of death—and take your craven life!"

"I'll take yours, instead, curse you!" snarled the red-haired giant, with one swift stride meeting the speaker.

A gasp of intense excitement went up from the spectators below, as they saw those two giants close in death-grapple, their muscular arms wound tightly around each other with such force that it seemed as though flesh and bones must give way beneath the fearful pressure, their bodies swaying to and fro as each exerted his powers, but their wide-spread feet fixed as though pinned fast to the flooring.

"Glory to the ram!" squealed Funny Felix in an ecstasy of delight. "The game-cock has got the undergrip onto the big shanghai! Good Lawd! I hain't see'd so much fun sence my old woman ketched me kissin' the cook!"

No one even glanced toward the enthusiastic veteran or paid the slightest attention to his speech. All saw what he did—that, despite the suddenness with which Vernon Shadutz made his attack at last, Sol Scott had foiled him and by superior dexterity gained an important advantage in the death-grapple.

Ducking down, his hands kept low, just as the red-haired giant clutched at him, he secured

the "under-hold," both of his arms below those of his adversary.

One short howl of fury told how bitterly Shadutz felt at being thus outgeneraled, but then he fought in silence. That terrible pressure upon his ribs told him that he had no breath to spare, not an ounce of strength to waste did he hope to escape defeat—and defeat meant death.

Twice he felt himself almost lifted clear of the floor, while all he could do could not budge the feet of Sol Scott an inch. Never before had he grappled with such an antagonist, never before had his boasted strength been neutralized as now.

In each moment that that terrible wrestle lasted, Vernon Shadutz felt what Sol Scott had said—all the tortures of death, for he began to believe that this was no merely mortal man with whom he was contending.

A gasping groan in unison came up from below. A heavy cloud was creeping over the face of the moon—black shadows were about to veil the scene—shut out that terribly fascinating sight.

"Git a broom, somebody, an' sweep them cobwebs away!" cried the irrepressible Felix from Frisco. "Jest as the funny part was comin'— By heavens! they're down!"

The black shadow swept over the scene and shut off all view of the duelists, but there came from the darkness above, a sound that could not be mistaken—a heavy *thud* upon the platform, followed by shuffling and thumping sounds that told the antagonists were still desperately struggling for the mastery! Struggling like wild beasts, in utter blackness, with but a few inches of safety surrounding them, separating them from death. A single revolution—the turning over of the one on top by the the man beneath—might hurl them from the narrow scaffold to the rocks below!

The uncertainty, the suspense was absolutely agonizing, and the spectators below must have suffered nearly as much during those brief moments as did the men above who fought for life.

Then came a sudden silence—the sounds of struggling ceased abruptly—and the crowd breathlessly listened, in awe, expecting to hear the horrible *thud* of a human being crashing upon the rocks. But instead, there came a voice, still cold and even: the voice of Sol Scott, addressing Vernon Shadutz:

"Yield or you die, cur! Confess that you are a cowardly dog for insulting a lady whose shoes you are unworthy to kiss—confess that you are a lying braggart, and swear to leave this part of the country as soon as your legs can carry you, or go to meet the death your crimes have long deserved!"

Not a sound came from the spectators as they listened for the answer, painfully straining their eyes in the vain endeavor to pierce the blackness that enveloped the windmill, scarcely daring to even draw a breath.

"Kill and be —!" came a husky growl from the defeated giant.

A brief, furious struggle—the last desperate effort of a desperate wretch—and then the cloud passed away from the face of the moon, and once more her silver light fell upon the scene—now one of strange, thrilling interest.

Standing erect upon the platform was Sol Scott, holding Vernon Shadutz with both hands pinned to his sides, head downward over the edge of the scaffold. Let him release his grasp, and the red-haired giant would plunge downward to a horrible death.

"Take your last look upon earth, then!" sternly uttered the victor. "Look down upon the rocks. You will lie a shattered mass of flesh and bones upon them in one minute, unless you repeat the words I dictate to you. I have spared you a dozen times at least, to-night, but now I solemnly swear that unless you confess, as I bid you, that you shall die!"

While darkness lasted, Shadutz was firm enough in declaring that he preferred death, but now it was different. Held helpless as he was, he could see the cruel rocks upon which he must fall, and his brute courage failed him as Sol Scott slowly counted off the seconds of his brief respite.

"Enough—I cave!" he gasped, suffocatingly.

"Confess that you are sorry for insulting a lady—swear that you will never again be guilty of a like outrage. Own that you are a craven scoundrel, beneath the contempt of all decent mankind. Promise to leave as soon as the law allows you, and to never curse this region by your presence again."

Chokingly Vernon Shadutz repeated the bitter speech, and then Sol Scott drew back, dropping the giant upon the planks.

"See that you keep your pledge by leaving at once. If I find you here after to-morrow, I will flog you out of town with a blacksnake," the tall miner said, sharply, then turned to descend.

He believed the giant was beyond the power of doing more mischief, that he was completely cowed, and turned his back upon him without a thought of danger from that quarter.

A brutal ruffian Vernon Shadutz undoubtedly was, but at one time in his past he had been

a man of whom many high predictions were made. Well educated, he was still proud, and the enthusiastic cheers from the crowd, greeting his bitter humiliation with joy, fairly maddened him. He forgot his love of life in his lust for revenge. If he could only slay this taunting demon—for mortal man he surely was not—he would gladly sacrifice his own life. And then—he saw his chance!

"Look out, Scott! the dirty dog's onto ye!" screamed Funny Felix, as the giant arose and leaped at his hated conqueror.

Whether it was this warning shout, or whether his keen ear caught the sound unavoidably made by Shadutz in regaining his feet, Sol Scott stepped swiftly aside and crouched low down, thus avoiding the mad rush of the infuriated ruffian.

Shadutz had thought only of slaying his enemy, and when he was foiled in this, he was unable to save himself. One hoarse yell of baffled rage—a horrible screech that rung long in the ears of those who heard it—and then a soul-sickening thud!

Sol Scott slowly descended to the ground and quietly resumed his outer garments, doffed when the duel was in preparation. An eager crowd surrounded him, showering praises and congratulations upon him. The feeling of horror which came over them as they witnessed the frightful death of Vernon Shadutz was short lived. A dreaded scourge had been removed, after a very dramatic manner, and they were just in the mood for raising up a hero in his place.

The tall miner received this ovation as he did every thing else—in a cool, half-contemptuous manner.

"You are entirely too kind, gentlemen," he said, at length, a trace of impatience in his tones. "Go worship the rocks, if you are glad Vernon Shadutz is dead; they did the good work, not I. I only read him a little lesson he has long needed—and one that any man among you might have given him, had the 'sand' not been lacking."

There was little more cheering after this, and the crowd was cooled down in a remarkably short time. The words of Sol Scott cut deep. Clearly he would never be a favorite with the masses unless he spoke the truth less bluntly.

All this while Funny Felix had stood apart from the crowd strangely silent for one who had taken such a great interest in the affair. Surely he was not disappointed at the result? His voice had ever been loud in favor of Sol Scott. Twice had he offered to fight against long odds on his account, and his had been the hand that saved the tall miner from the bullet of Rucker Shadutz—his the voice that warned him of his deadly peril.

Yet there was a dark frown upon his brow, a troubled look in his blue eyes as he bore the crowd company toward the town. His head was bowed and he seemed unconscious of where his footsteps were leading him, but as if instinctively he kept close behind Sol Scott.

He paused outside, when Scott, in company with several who insisted upon his drinking with them, entered the Dew Drop Inn—another queer fact, considering the convivial nature of Funny Felix. Clearly something was sorely troubling the genial '49-er.

His reverie was broken by the sudden reappearance of Sol Scott, who had shaken off his friends who wanted him to join them in making a night of it, and under the red light of the colored globe the gaze of the two strange men met fairly.

"I was jist waitin' to say a few words to ye, boss," said Funny Felix, quietly. "I didn't keer to disturb you when with them gents."

A swift change swept over the face of the tall miner, but it was only momentary; and if Felix noted the fact, he gave no sign.

"I am entirely at your service, sir," politely responded Scott. "Shall we walk down the street? There will be less danger of our words being caught by inquisitive ears than if we stood here."

Silently the veteran nodded. They walked a few rods together, then Funny Felix said, abruptly:

"Mebbe you'll think it queer, boss, but I'm in dead earnest when I tell ye that I'm monstrous sorry the big cuss didn't rub ye out, back yender."

"Indeed!" and Sol Scott laughed softly. "May I ask why you took so much trouble to save my life, then?—for save it you did, once from a treacherous shot behind, and again when Vernon Shadutz made his last despairing rush at me."

"Simply because I could not look on and see a brave man die by the hand of a treacherous scoundrel—but sorry, because then I would not have to perform a very disagreeable duty—that of arresting you for murder! Sol Scott, you are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER VI.

A TERRIBLE ACCUSATION.

"A PERSON down-stairs to see you, ma'am," announced the trim little waiting-maid, but delivering the message less fluently than usual, as though in doubt as to how it would be received by her mistress.

"You had instructions to say to all that I was not at home to-day, Lucy," came the response, a little sharply.

"Please, ma'am, I know, and so I told him, but he won't take that for an answer. He says he must see you, on very 'portant business, this very hour?"

"What kind of a looking man? Do you know him? Is he a messenger from the office, think?"

"Old, and dreadfully hairy, and please, I don't know, ma'am," stammered the abigail, confused by the questions so rapidly put.

Her mistress sunk back upon the sofa from which she had half arisen at the announcement.

"Go tell him I will not see him unless he sends up his name and some assurance that his business is as important as he claims," she said, decisively.

This conversation took place in Denver, one week prior to the events narrated in the preceding chapters. The last speaker was Mrs. Daniel Brown, once Miss Rachel Trowbridge, but now the wife of 'Dan Brown of Denver,' one of, if not the most celebrated member on the rolls of the "Rocky Mountain Detective Agency."

One leaf from Dan Brown's eventful life has been placed on record, [See "BEADLE'S DIME LIBRARY," No. 105,] telling how he won fame, fortune and a lovely wife, besides earning the gratitude of all honest men, by bringing to justice the band of road-agents led by one Captain Moonshine, wild tales of whose daring exploits may still be heard in the Silver State.

The wife Dan Brown thus won was as rich as she was beautiful, and the Agency naturally supposed they were to lose the services of their keenest detective, but Dan Brown was in love with his perilous profession, and his fair young bride was proud of the good he had done and might still do, so after the honeymoon, they settled down in Denver and Dan Brown reported for service.

On the night before the day on which the importunate visitor called upon Mrs. Dan Brown, the detective told her he was under orders to take the field at once, to arrest a criminal who for years had eluded justice, but who was now run to earth, and then endeavor to break up a gang of road-agents known from the peculiar style of disguise adopted, as the Owls.

"I am glad to be at active work again," added Dan Brown, still loverlike, "and only sorry to leave you on such short notice. The mask ball is to-morrow night, too!"

There is no necessity for recording their further conversation. Some carping critics might find fault with it as being too "spooney" for man and wife of over a year's standing.

Enough that Dan Brown took his departure that same evening, and for this reason Mrs. Brown refused to receive visitors.

"Please ma'am, I couldn't help it!" half sobbed the little waiting-maid, rushing into the room, closely followed by the man who would not take no for an answer.

"She ain't to blame, ma'am," the intruder said, as he closed the door and stood with his back against it. "I was bound fer to see you, ef I hed to bust things wide open."

Her eyes flashing, her cheeks flaming, Rachel Brown sprung from the sofa, one hand imperiously extended.

"Leave the room and house! How dare you intrude—?"

"I don't mean no harm, lady, but I cain't go ontel I tell you what I come here to say," doggedly interposed the stranger.

With the swift grace of a lithe young panther, the woman darted to a desk and then turned upon the insolent stranger, a revolver staring him full in the face, the sharp double click as the hammer was raised, emphasizing her words:

"I will not parley with you. Leave this room before I can count ten, or I will send a bullet through your brain!"

"You kin shoot ef you like, but it'll be murder, an' you'll be mighty sorry you didn't hear me out," said the fellow, sullenly, yet never flinching a hair's breadth from his position.

"What I mean to say, ef you let me live long enough, consarns you as nighly as it does me, an' Dan Brown more'n all."

That name was spoken just in time to save the foolhardy fellow's life. Rachel's forefinger was about to contract itself, but at the mention of her husband the weapon was lowered.

For a moment she hesitated, still holding the weapon, then turned to the trembling servant girl and said:

"Lucy, put on your bonnet and go to the office. Tell the captain to send me a good man, at once. Do you return with him and bid him wait outside the door. Tell him to arrest any man attempting to leave this house, without I come to the door with him."

The stranger promptly stepped aside and allowed the girl to pass.

"You're takin' a powerful sight of onnecessary trouble, ma'am," he said, quietly.

"That is my affair, not yours," retorted Rachel. "If your purpose is legitimate, you have nothing to fear. If otherwise, you will leave this house only as a prisoner or a dead man."

"It'll take half an hour for the gal to git your detective here; by that time I'll be ready to go 'long with him, ef you think I'd orter," said the stranger, coolly.

Rachel scrutinized him keenly.

To all outward seeming, a man well along in years. Short, stoutly built, with an enormous hunch between his shoulders. A face deeply lined and weather-beaten, sun-tanned to the color of old leather. A prominent nose, eyes small and deep set, but black and keen as needles. Thick, matted hair and long beard of a grizzled gray. Clothing rough, well worn and travel-stained. Heavy boots of horse-hide, still spurred and spattered with dried mud. Altogether, a hard looking ornament for a lady's dainty boudoir.

"Sit down and tell me what you have to say—how you can justify this ruffianly intrusion," coldly uttered the lady.

"I don't blame you fer lookin' an' talkin' sour, ma'am," said the stranger, his voice no longer rough and desperate, but husky with strong though concealed emotion. "But you cain't blame me so much when you know all. 'Pears like I'll go clean crazy some o' these days, an' all along o' him!"

"Whom do you mean by him?" demanded Rachel.

"Dan Brown of Denver, as he calls hisself now—"

"Stop!" and the outraged beauty rose to her feet, indignation flashing from her eyes. "You are speaking of my husband—"

"He never was your husband—he fooled you as he has many a poor gal afore you!"

For one moment Rachel Brown stood like a statue, petrified by this terrible assertion, but then the blood rushed back to her heart, and superb in her wifely indignation, her revolver rose to the level of the stranger's head.

"Take back those foul words—say that you lie, or die with the base calumny fresh on your tongue!"

The old man never moved. The old doggedness came into his face, and he gazed sullenly into her blazing eyes.

"Shoot. I ain't so much in love with life as to lie to save it. Shoot—an' go on living with the man who has ruined ye, who is even now plannin' when an' how to meet my poor child, his lawful wife!"

There was the bitterness of truth in his words and face. The stricken woman stared at him, the fire fading from her eyes, the brilliant color from her cheeks. The weapon was lowered, undischarged, and her brain reeled—she would have fallen to the floor but for the quick leap of the man who had dealt this terrible blow.

Gently he supported her to the sofa, muttering:

"It's hard to strike down a dainty critter like that, but rough as the truth is, she'd better know it than to live on in bitter sin with that hound—"

Softly as his words were spoken, Rachel caught them, and with a desperate effort she rallied her fainting energies.

"Return to your seat and tell me all—but bear in mind you must exhibit *proofs* of your charges. And if you fail to substantiate them, true as there is a heaven above us, you shall die—if I have to kill you with my own hands!"

"I'll stand the resks, lady, though some mought think it hard lines fer a man to be talked to like a dog, when he was tryin' to save you from a sin—unconscious of it though you be."

"No moralizing—go on! Man! can't you see that I am suffering worse than the tortures of death?" gasped Rachel.

"Then you can understand the black story I come here to tell," said the old man, his eyes aglow. "Fust, whar is the man as now calls hisself Dan Brown of Denver?"

"Gone—on secret duty—sent by the officers of the agency."

"Whar to, an' when did he go?"

"To Golconda; he started by the stage, last night."

"You're sure you ain't made no mistake? He went to Golconda, this State, and tuck the ten o'clock stage last night?"

Rachel bowed in silence. Her tongue was almost powerless now.

"Yet I saw Dan Brown in Denver last night at one o'clock, I saw him this mornin' at nine," deliberately averred the man.

"Impossible! he told me himself—" began Rachel, only to have her speech cut short by a sneering laugh.

"One lie more on top o' the rest—what does it matter? He made up that story jest to blind your eyes. He hain't bin ordered nowhar—ef you don't b'lieve my words, call in your detective when he comes, or go an' ax the head boss o' the agency. When he spoke them words to you, he knowed that his lawful wife was in Denver huntin' fer him—an' when he left you, he went right straight to her. Now he wouldn't 'a' left her as soon as he did, only I was on the trail, an' come onto him onawares."

"If they are lawful man and wife, as you say, how could you interfere with them—why should he fear you?"

These words were spoken slowly, calmly, but they cost the woman agony beyond the power of pen to depict.

"Let me tell you the story from the beginning, lady, an' then you kin git at the rights of it better."

"My name is Ezra Drake. Five year ago I had a good farm, well stocked and fixed up in Kansas. I was gittin' along in life, but I wasn't satisfied to make haste slowly, an' I got mixed up in a mighty payin' but powerful resky business; that of stealin' hosses an' other stock, an' runnin' 'em down South to a market."

"We was a big gang, with reg'lar laws an' rules, and spread over half a dozen States. We had a smart man fer chief, an' we would each one o' the band, hev laid our lives on his faithfulness. You can guess how bad we was fooled, when I say that our boss then, is the man now knowed as Dan Brown, of Denver."

Ezra Drake paused, as though expecting an outburst of indignation from the listener, but she only nodded for him to continue. Despite herself, the cold, matter-of-fact manner with which the old man gave these details, was slowly but surely undermining her faith in the man who had wedded her. For now she remembered that long ago, soon after they were married, Dan Brown had told her something of this gigantic league, had said that he was the chief means of breaking it up and destroying the head criminals—that this brilliant exploit proved the first stepping-stone to the pinnacle of fame which he had since reached as a successful detective.

"They was only me an' my son an' my da'ter Rose in the far'ly," resumed the old man, his voice growing harder and more bitter as he proceeded. "I don't say we was clean o' sin an' wrong-doin', but I do say we was a happy fambly ontel he come. I knowed from the fust that it wasn't fer my comp'ny nor yit the sake o' Jehudi's talk that the han'some young chief called so often an' stopped so long at a time, but I didn't keer then. I was proud, to tell the truth, fer I honored him, an' thought pritty Rose couldn't do no better then to marry him. But the day come when my eyes was opened, an' I saw the human sarpint as he was."

"I can't talk of it easy even now, lady, an' then sech stories wasn't tended fer ears like yours. Enough that our chief growed tired of Rose, an' left her—ruined an' disgraced."

"Jehudi an' me follered an' hunted him out. He lied about it, an' tried to throw the blame onto Tom Johnson, a honest young farmer as used to hang around a'ter Rose ontel he saw he stood no show 'longside the han'some young stranger, who dressed so fine, wore sech rich jewelry and had so much money. But Rose had told us all, an' we fetched him back at the muzzle of a shot-gun. Ef he hedn't bin our chief, an' we bound by a terrible oath never to shed the blood o' one of the league, he would have died like a dog!"

"We tuck him back, an' he married Rose. They lived together a little while, ontel the baby come, then he run away. We didn't spicion the fact then, but all the while he was quiet after the marriage, he was plottin' an' schemin' to break up the league."

"The blow was a sudden an' sure one. Almost in a day the hull league was arrested or killed. Jehudi an' me was tuck among the fust. An' when the trial come off, our chief was the one fatal witness ag'in' us."

"Me an' Jehudi were sent to State's prison fer twenty years. Weswore to escape, an' we did in the end, though not fer 'most three years. Then we set out to hunt up Rose an' her husband."

"We found her. Mighty low she hed fallen—bitter as the 'fession is comin' from the lips of a father who loved her as the very core of his soul. The baby was dead. The old fri'nds fell away from her when we was found guilty. She could not find any work—all our property went in fines an' payment to those who swore we hed stolen from them. A hard winter come; an' then the baby died—starved to death, I reckon. After that, thar was but one step furdur down—an' Rose tuck it."

"We hunted fer our chief, an' one day Jehudi found him. He found a slip-noose at the same time. Dan Brown, as the traitor called himself now, outswore him, an' my boy was hung fer a crime he never done."

"I never could come onto the man ontel last night; I hed l'arned a good deal about him sense strikin' Denver, an' when I knowed he was livin' with a beautiful young woman who thought herself his wife, I swore to tortur' him as he hed tortur'd me, afore I let out his black heart's blood."

"I found Rose livin' here, jest come, an' she let out a secret onawares when she was so startled by my comin'. That led me to watch, an' so I found him last night."

"When you thought he was ridin' away towards Golconda, Dan Brown was folded tight in the arms of his lawful wife!"

"You are lying—your story is a foul fabrication from beginning to end!" cried Rachel, rousing in her desperation; but bold as her speech was, her heart was as heavy as lead, for

she felt that this terrible accusation was founded on fact.

"I don't ax you to trust my word alone," quietly said Drake. "Go ax at the office of Dan Brown, hes bin sent away on secret duty—ef he left town by the stage, as you say he told you, you kin l'arn by the bookin' agent."

"He may—he must have had good reason—but that he is the husband of your daughter, that I never will believe!"

"The marriage is on record; I kin bring the judge as spoke the words over 'em," coldly added the old man.

"Some villain assumed his name, then—"

"Could a rascal borry his face, an' form an' all, too? Here is a picture which he hed tuck fer Rose, the same week they was married. Look at it—an' read them words on the back."

Pale as a ghost, Rachel clutched the photograph Drake extended, but a blood-red mist swam before her eyes, and she could at first distinguish nothing. But then, like a phantom slowly shaping itself out of nothing, the face and figure of the young, handsome detective grew clear and terribly lifelike.

Even she could doubt no longer, though the picture had been taken some years before she knew Dan Brown; it was the likeness of the man whom she had called husband! She turned over the card, and read the words written upon the back:

"To my wife Rose—HARRY DUPONT."

"That was the name he went by when he was our chief," said Ezra Drake, picking up the picture from the floor, where it had fallen from the nerveless fingers of the stricken woman.

For a few moments there was silence, then once more the undying love which Rachel felt for Dan Brown flamed up in his defense. Inch by inch she was contesting the ground that seemed sliding from under her feet.

"It sounds terribly true—but I cannot, will not believe it!" she gasped, her voice hoarse and unnatural. "It is some diabolical plot to destroy him and me. Why do you come here and tell me these dreadful lies?"

"Every word an' every pint I kin prove so that even you'll be forced to believe me," said Drake, slowly and coldly. "'Tain't fer love o' you, nur yit to save you the sin o' livin' with a man who's already got a wife. You ain't nothin' to me. I would not turn over my hand to open your eyes, ef the man who hes fooled ye was any other than Dan Brown. But I do this because I kin so deal him a bitter blow—not in the heart as he did me, but in the pocket, whar he'll feel it harder."

"You don't believe me, I see. Wait, an' ef you keer to know jest how low the man is whom you love, you shall hev the knowledge this very night. Your own eyes, your own ears shall help to condemn him, ef only you hev the courage—"

Rachel rose upright, laughing sharply. A sudden change came over her. She was cold and hard—a vengeful woman.

"The courage shall not be lacking. You shall prove your charges or you will never live to see the sun rise again! I will kill you like a mad-dog, if you fail!"

"I won't lift so much as a finger to hender ye, ma'am. This very night I will show you Dan Brown in comp'ny with his real wife. It may be that we kin manidge to overhear thar talk. I interrupted them afore all was settled, last night, but I found out that they agreed to meet this evenin' at the mask ball, an' thar come to a full understandin'. We kin go thar in disguise, ef you like. I'll go an' get them—"

"You will do no such thing," sharply interrupted the woman, now cold and outwardly composed. "There is too much at stake for me to waste a single precaution. You will remain here, under lock and key until we start for the ball."

"Jest as you say, ma'am," equally responded Ezra Drake. "I was up all night, an' ef you don't object, I'll lay down on the flo' an' ketch forty winks afore it's time to start."

CHAPTER VII.

UNMASKING A TRAITOR.

THE last hope fled from Rachel's breast at this ready acquiescence on the part of Ezra Drake. He must be speaking the truth, and confident of proving the terrible charges he made. If it was only a cunning plot to destroy her faith in Dan Brown, the old man would have insisted on going for a few minutes, at least, to let his confederates know the part they were expected to play.

In silence she motioned him to lie down upon the sofa, then sunk into an easy-chair herself, thinking long and deeply.

Her reflections were bitter indeed. Never had woman loved man more dearly than Rachel Trowbridge loved Dan Brown, but now she felt that this ocean of love was slowly but surely turning to a dead sea of bitter hatred. Stubbornly she had fought against believing his double treachery, only yielding when proof was piled on proof and doubt was no longer possible.

"I will do it!" fell almost unconsciously from her lips. "I will go and see for myself, and if there is truth in his words, I will kill the man I

once loved—my God! the man I still love, even though he be the lawful husband of another woman!"

An explosive snort from the nostrils of Ezra Drake startled the wretched woman. She stared at him for a moment as though unable to account for his presence in her private room, then her face once more grew cold and stern, for she remembered all.

The old man was lying on the sofa, breathing heavily, like one worn out by fatigue and loss of sleep. Considerate even in her terrible distress, Rachel moved about softly, and instead of summoning the maid, went in quest of her, lest the rest of the man who had stricken her to the heart should be disturbed.

It was night when the soft touch of her hand awakened the slumberer. A yawn, a huge stretch, then Ezra Drake was ready for business.

"They's one thing we fergot," he said, abruptly. "Tickets!"

"I have them here," said Rachel, turning from the chair on which she had spread a monk's hood, gown and rosary. "I have forgotten nothing. This is your disguise. In ten minutes the carriage will be at the door."

Ezra Drake looked keenly into her face. Even more beautiful than ever did she appear then, robed in somber black, a white fillet hiding her hair—a nun such as one occasionally beholds in paintings, but never in real life.

Her voice was cold and passionless as she spoke.

"You think you kin go through with it—see an' hear what you're almost sartin to, an' yit never give way?"

"I am ice—my heart seems dead within me. I could gaze upon him, dying at my feet, and never shed one tear."

Ezra Drake shook his head doubtfully. He saw that the woman was calm enough now, but would it last? Then he laughed to himself softly. It would last long enough for his purpose. After his blow was struck, what matter to him?

Entering the carriage, the monk and nun were whirled rapidly away through the lighted streets, then pausing before the open doors of the theater building, in which the masque ball was to take place. Rachel thrust the tickets of admission into the hand of her companion before they alighted from the coach.

As usual on such occasions, a rabble of boys and loafers surrounded the doors, but the hunch-backed monk pushed through them, and passing along the vestibule, ascended the stairs.

The ball was a public one, and so there was no difficulty in obtaining entrance to those who could buy tickets. At midnight all were to unmask, when such improper characters as had gained admittance would be promptly ejected by the strong police force on duty.

The hour was an early one when the monk and nun entered, and but few persons were present.

A flooring had been laid level with the stage, running over the tops of the chairs in they parquette and back to the dress circle. On this the dancing was to take place.

"Look around and see if they are here yet," whispered Rachel, from beneath her full mask. "If they have so much to settle, they will be almost sure to come early."

"Rose is here, but I don't see him!" muttered Ezra Drake.

"Where—show me—but carefully not to arouse her suspicions."

The words came in gasps, that showed what a fire was raging beneath that calm exterior. Not yet could the deceived wife think or speak about her successful rival with composure.

"That's her, dressed in that fly-away rig, yender," said Drake, pointing out a woman dressed as a ballet-dancer, leaning gracefully against one of the pillars supporting the balcony.

An icy hand seemed gripping the heart-strings of the wronged wife as she looked upon her rival, yet a feeling of scorn crept over her as she noted the bold, voluptuous pose. To be slighted, forsaken for an animal like that!

At that moment the dainty mask which only half-covered the face of the woman became detached and fell down upon her full, swelling bosom. It was quickly replaced, as though she had strong reasons for keeping incognito, but in that one instant, Rachel had taken a complete photograph of the face.

Even she could not deny its beauty, not the beauty of soul, but that which is so much more effective with most men. The face of a Venus, a Cleopatra; a face that appeals to the animal passions; a face such as many men have gone mad over—the face Balzac pictured in his mind when he penned his terribly weird tale of the Succubus.

At least one other pair of eyes rested upon the face before the filken mask was replaced, and Rachel almost swooned as she heard an exclamation in the aisle behind her—the voice of one who had until that night been her guiding star—the all in all of this life to her—the voice of Dan Brown of Denver!

She felt him brush past her, and choking down the terrible emotion that threatened to burst

her heart, she saw him hasten to greet the scantily-dressed siren beyond.

If she had felt doubt before, there was none in her mind now. The man was dressed as a gallant of the time of Queen Elizabeth, his form admirably displayed by the close-fitting garb; and as she gazed breathlessly upon him, Rachel recognized her husband!

She saw him clasp the ballet-girl's hand and raise it gallantly to his lips. A terrible sickness came over her, and she sunk into a chair, faintly murmuring:

"Take me away—I am dying!"

"You ain't sure, yit—thar may be some mistake," hurriedly whispered the old man. "Look! they're comin' this way. For land's sake don't give way now!"

Through a dancing mist Rachel saw them approaching, arm in arm, and as they reached the aisle, turning to reach the floor, she heard the voice of Dan Brown utter:

"We must have our talk out before the crowd comes. Over on the stage, we can be secret enough, and—"

The remainder of the sentence was lost to her ears as the brilliant couple receded, but what she heard was enough.

"You kin prove now whether or no I lied," whispered the monk. "Mong them wings we kin git close enough fer to hear what they say—'nough, anyhow, fer you to see that I told you no more than the downright truth."

He was expending his breath needlessly. The few words she had caught, determined Rachel to hear more, if possible. She no longer thought of leaving the hall, and was only waiting to steady her unstrung nerves, and to avoid the appearance of following the gay couple on purpose.

She saw them cross the floor and reach the stage. The foot-lights were not yet turned on, and the jets above among the flies were burning dimly, the stage, especially among the wings, being cast into obscurity favorable for espial.

She saw them near the rear of the stage, saw the cavalier bring a chair for the ballet-girl, then one for himself. She saw them seated closely side by side, and hidden almost wholly from the few people upon the floor.

"We kin git close up ahind them, an' they never know anybody is nigh," eagerly whispered Drake, who was resolved that not the shadow of a doubt should remain in the mind of his companion as to the truth of the terrible story he had told her. "By goin' around to the other side, then keepin' onder kiver of them wings, we kin git whar we kin hear every word they speak. But kin you do it? Kin you hear what you'll be likely to hear, an' not give way? Ef thar is a scene, the police 'll take a hand in, an' that'd be monstrous rough onto a lady like you."

A low, chilling laugh fell from the wronged wife's lips.

"I have borne worse than death now—my heart is dead, I tell you. Nothing more can move it. Come, let us go."

If Ezra Drake was not satisfied, he dared say no more, but silently followed her lead.

More than one pair of eyes were turned curiously upon the somber couple as they made their way along the edge of the platform until hidden from view of those on the stage, then turning and crossing over. A strangely matched pair, surely!

The soft, clinging folds of the nun's habit could not wholly disguise the superb form of Rachel Brown, and she looked like a tragedy queen as she glided silently forward. Behind her shuffled the monk, with his huge bunch but poorly hidden by the garb he wore. It was like beauty attended by the beast, thought the few whose attention was momentarily drawn toward them.

The stage was reached, and Rachel paused behind one of the wings, hidden alike from those upon the floor and the twain whose criminal conversation she was so desirous of eaves-dropping.

"You had no right to doubt me," came the voice of Dan Brown, clear and distinct, yet low and guarded. "I told you I would come—"

"But if you had failed, would it be the first lie your lips have told me?" demanded the ballet-girl, her rich voice sounding hard and cold, as though doubt still dwelt in her heart.

"Let the past dead bury its dead," is a good old maxim, pet," laughed the cavalier. "I own now, as I admitted last night, that I played you a scoundrelly trick in the old days, but I am able and more than ready to make ample amends now. After all, you should not bear such a bitter grudge, for you are twice as glorious a woman now as when we parted."

"It has not been peace and happiness that wrought the change," retorted Rose, with a hard laugh. "If you knew all I suffered—"

"But I don't want to know, and you must learn to forget," a little impatiently responded the traitor. "The past is past, and if you are only sensible, there is a glorious future before us both."

"Father told me something last night," she said, slowly, as though trying to read the effect of each word as they fell from her lips. "He

said you had married again—were living with a rich and beautiful young lady. Yet you swore to me, only a few minutes before he came in, that your love for me was stronger than even in those days of the past, before—"

"Before I played the fool—exactly."

"Then he said true? You are married? You got a divorce?"

"I could not find or hear anything of you. I came to believe you were dead, or I might have got a divorce, when the great temptation came in my way," the cavalier said, quickly adding: "I am glad that I did not know, now, for you are mine by law, whether you are still so in heart—are you, Rose, darling?"

Again that low, hard laugh; musical, but wholly devoid of soul.

"I am not so impulsive as I once was, Harry. I prefer to hear you out before committing myself either way."

"I can't blame you. I taught you the lesson. But you will soon see that your suspicion wrongs me. Let me convince you."

"Of course you know that I am Dan Brown, now, the famous detective. Little more than a year ago, I made the acquaintance of my—of the lady who at present passes with the world as my wife, in a peculiar manner. I saved her life and fortune, from a brace of scoundrels who were plotting against her and it. She was young, lovely and grateful. Of course there could be but one ending—we were married."

"But she is not your wife!" hastily uttered the ballet-girl.

"I know: you occupy that enviable position. But I married her in good faith, and never regretted the action until I met you and recognized you yesterday. In an instant the old love—that which we felt before trouble came—was born again, and tenfold stronger. I can't explain it, Rose, but if a thousand pure, innocent women like Rachel, stood between us now, I would crush them one and all without a pang of remorse, rather than lose you, my peerless one!"

There came the faint echo of a kiss following these passionate words, and never before did Dan Brown stand so near death's door as at that moment. The white hand of the betrayed wife clasped a revolver, and she was on the point of stepping around the wing to confront the traitor, when Ezra Drake firmly clasped her arm.

The silent warning was sufficient. Once more the nun stood like a statue, listening to the damnable revelations.

"If I could only trust, only believe you, Harry!" came the rich voice, now grown soft and truly musical.

"You shall, and that before this night is spent," was the earnest reply. "Let me tell you what I have planned since I left you, last night, and then you will see that I am devoted to you alone."

Rachel believes important business has called me to Golconda. I mean to start for that place in the morning. From there I will send her word to come—that I need her aid in carrying out my plans. She will obey, she will go—but she will never come back again!"

Imagine how terribly those words fell upon the sore heart of the wronged wife! Even the ballet-girl was startled.

"Surely you would not—not—"

"Kill her—why don't you spit out the ugly word? Is this a time to be so squeamish? Look how I stand. I married you. The proofs of this marriage still exist. Your father was a witness, and he can bring the proofs to light whenever he chooses to do so. He hates me—you know that. I don't deny that he has good cause. He knows, or will soon find out, that I have been married again. He can have me arrested for bigamy—and I would sooner die than have that take place, and my buried past be raked up as a feast for the curious. Nor would you be spared."

"Now look at the other side. It would be worse than death to Rachel, such an exposure. She would far rather die than lose her trust in me, in such a shape, too! She is very rich. If she dies, it all comes to me—and with it, Rose, we can go where no one knows our past, and live gloriously happy."

"But to shed her blood—she has been as the wife of your bosom! Bad as I am, now, it is too horrible even to think of!"

"Of course I would not strike the blow—I couldn't. But there are many hard up fellows who would feel no such scruples. And to one of them I mean to intrust the work—hush!"

During this conversation the hall had been gradually filling. The gas was now turned on, and the band began playing a march. Several masks came upon the stage, and there could be no further privacy for the conspirators.

Ezra Drake, the instant the gas was turned on, grasped the hand of Rachel and drawing it through his arm, led her swiftly away from their place of espial, before the ballet-girl and her cavalier could arise and discover their dangerous proximity.

He led her to a retired seat, and stood beside her, whispering:

"Sit still until your nerves is steadied a little."

"I'm dubious this night's work 'll be too much fer you."

Rachel made no reply, but gazed steadily at the cavalier as he and the ballet-girl arose and joined the other couples as they slowly marched to the promenade music.

The fears Ezra Drake entertained were without foundation. There was no danger of her making a "scene" by fainting. Her heart seemed to have died within her while listening to the diabolical plot of the man whom she had loved as only a true, passionate soul like hers could love.

As he watched her keenly, Ezra Drake bit his lips nervously. He misinterpreted her stony calm, and thought she was not yet convinced that the cavalier was her husband—that she fondly clung to the belief that all this was part of some cunningly atrocious plot.

"Ef you kin b'ar to bev your last doubt blowed away, watch me," he muttered, starting to join in the moving crowd.

"What do you intend doing?" Rachel demanded, also arising.

"Show you the face of that man—unmask a p'izen traitor!"

"Good! Wait until they come around again, then fall in behind them," said the nun, her voice as steady as fate.

Ezra Drake seemed nervous and uneasy as she took his left arm, but he dared not raise any objection.

Quietly they slipped in behind the cavalier and his companion. A few steps, then Rachel pressed his arm and quickly released it.

With a swift and dexterous movement, the hunchback reached forward and cut the string which held the silken mask over the face of the gayly dressed cavalier. The mask fell to the floor, and its wearer wheeled around with an angry exclamation, revealing the bold, handsome face of Dan Brown, the detective!

Rachel quickly raised her mask and confronted him, her face pale as death, but infinite scorn flashing from her eyes.

One moment—then the unmasked traitor abandoned his companion and rushed in headlong haste from the hall!

CHAPTER VIII.

DAN BROWN, OR HIS "DOUBLE?"

"SOL SCOTT, you are my prisoner!"

As he uttered these words, Funny Felix from Frisco clapped the tall miner on the shoulder with one hand, while holding a cocked revolver ready for use in the other. Clearly he was disposed to take no chances with a man of such wonderful prowess as Sol Scott had that night exhibited.

To all appearance, such caution was unnecessary. The man thus strangely arrested, never even started, and of the twain, he was clearly the least agitated. That low, mocking laugh broke from his lips, and he steadily met the keen gaze of the detective.

"My dear sir," he said, a faint trace of contempt in his tone, "you are putting yourself to a great deal of unnecessary trouble. I was going with you quietly. You might have had the company of a friend to the police-station, instead of acting as escort to a prisoner."

"You know me, then?" asked the disguised miner, in surprise.

"Since our meeting under the red globe, back yonder, yes; before that, no. I took you for what you seemed—a jolly, big-hearted, reckless soul of the days gone by. I did wonder at your taking such an interest in me and my fortunes, this evening, but never once suspected the truth until I met your gaze as I left the Dew Drop Inn. I must congratulate you on your disguise and acting, Mr. Dan Brown of Denver!"

"So, you know me, then?" ejaculated the detective in surprise.

"I knew that you were on my track, so inferred your identity," was the cool response. "I am glad that a master of the art has taken me, not a common bungler."

"If you knew I was after you, why didn't you levant? why did you make yourself so conspicuous to-night?"

"Perhaps I was tired of running—perhaps a fool; who knows?"

"Or something new has come to light—you can prove the charge false?" eagerly demanded the detective.

"No; the charge is perfectly correct. I killed General Watkins Cowperthwait," coldly uttered Sol Scott.

"I am sorry. I was in hopes that you could clear yourself. As it is, I must do my duty, though I never had a more disagreeable one to perform."

"Your kind tone emboldens me to ask a favor, Mr. Brown," said Sol Scott, earnestly. "Will you grant it?"

"If possible, yes," replied the detective, without a moment's hesitation. "Anything but releasing you from arrest."

"I don't ask that. You deserve the feather you have won, and 'would be a pity to tear it from your cap. But if I chose to go free, even now, good man as Dan Brown undeniably is, he could not keep me in bonds."

"I trust you will not make the attempt."

seriously responded the detective. "My orders are strict—to take you, dead or alive."

"The favor I wish you to grant is of a very different nature. You remember the lady I defended? She is now at the Parker House. I wish you to take me there for a few moments."

"I'll do it, gladly—my only regret being that we do not go as friends, instead of prisoner and officer. Your wife, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," and the white teeth of the miner gleamed through his tawny mustache.

"Sweetheart, then—not so awkward as I thought," muttered the detective, but not so low that Sol Scott failed to catch the words.

"Not a word ever passed between us before this night, though the lady was not the entire stranger I at first believed her. It is strange, though, that your keen eyes did not penetrate her disguise!"

"Why so? I took her to be another Calamity Jane, out on a bender. Surely no reputable woman would—"

"Stop!" sternly cried the prisoner. "That lady, sir, was none other than your wife—Mrs. Daniel Brown!"

A cry of utter amazement burst from the lips of the detective, at this disclosure, and his hand fell from the shoulder of the miner.

Then an equally sudden change came over Sol Scott.

Dexterously he wrested the pistol from the unnerved hand of the detective, while his right hand clasped his throat. A quick trip knocked the officer's legs from under him, and he was thrown prostrate at the feet of the miner.

"Not a word—not a sound from your lips, Dan Brown, or I scatter your brains over the street!" sternly cried Sol Scott, kneeling over the fallen man and thrusting the cocked revolver fairly against his temple.

Instantly the cool courage for which he was remarkable, returned to the overthrown detective, as he realized that he had been outwitted. There was not the faintest tremor in his voice as he spoke:

"Don't threaten more than you can perform, Mr. Scott. I don't believe the best microscope ever made could detect an atom of brains in my head-piece, or I would never have fallen into such a clumsily baited trap!"

"The least pressure of my finger now would solve that problem," gravely said the miner. "Can you give any good reason why I should hold my hand?"

"Only that the report would be apt to bring curious eyes to look upon your work, and that might be inconvenient for you. Better take your knife. It is equally sure, and being silent, you will have so much the more law before Sam Ellis strikes your trail," was the cool, almost impudent reply.

"You refuse to beg for your life?"

"After I have made such an ass of myself—yes. Do your work, and quickly. If you fail—if I live through this night I will have a double motive for hunting you down."

Sol Scott laughed bitterly as he removed the threatening pistol. Instead of drawing a knife, he arose and held the butt of the revolver toward the detective as he leaped swiftly erect.

"Take your weapon, Dan Brown," he said, coolly. "I am your prisoner again. There would have been no change, but you smiled incredulously when I said even you could not keep me in bonds did I choose to go free, and as I never like to have my word doubted, I gave you the easiest proof I could."

More amazed than ever, Dan Brown of Denver grasped the restored weapon. He seemed wholly at a loss how to act. He could not fathom the strange conduct of the tall miner.

Again Sol Scott showed his white teeth in a smile as he noted the perplexity of the detective.

"The explanation is easy. I am tired of running from justice. As soon as I learned that Dan Brown of Denver was on my trail, I resolved to yield quietly to him whenever he pierced my disguise. For years I have been a hunted fugitive, doubling and twisting to throw the human blood-hounds off my trail. I have grown tired of such a life—and then, the only one for whose sake I dreaded the shame of the gallows, is dead. Alone in the world, I'd rather die than live on as I have lived these ten years."

"I am under orders to arrest you, colonel, and I must obey; but I'd rather lose a year of my life!" earnestly said Brown.

"You must do your duty, feelings or no feelings. I give you my word as a one-time officer and gentleman, that I will not attempt to escape, if you will keep your promise and take me to the Parker House for a few moments."

"Then there is a lady in the case? I thought it but a part of your cunning scheme to lower my overweening conceit."

"The lady you saw in disguise at the Dew Drop Inn is a guest at the hotel," briefly responded Scott.

"And I was fool enough to half believe you when you said she was my wife!" laughed Dan Brown, as they walked arm-in-arm toward the hotel, more like brothers than captive and guardian.

Sol Scott said nothing, but there was a smile

on his lips, and a peculiar gleam in his blue eyes, strange enough in one whom a shameful death on the gallows stared full in the face.

Entering the hotel, Sol Scott, followed by the rough-looking "Funny Felix from Frisco," passed the landlord with a cool nod, then ran lightly up-stairs, pausing before and rapping at the door of the room where he had left the bewildered woman.

There was a brief silence, then a muffled voice bade them enter. Sol Scott opened the door and entered, the detective following.

The woman arose from the sofa where she had been lying and confronted them. Red circles were around her eyes, the traces of passionate tears on her cheeks, but still she was gloriously, almost peerlessly beautiful.

"Merciful heavens! Rachel, what brought you here?"

The voice belonged to Dan Brown, but her eyes were bent upon the face of Sol Scott, believing he had spoken.

"So you throw off the mask at last!" she exclaimed, bitterly.

"Your husband spoke, lady, not I," said Sol Scott, quietly, at the same time placing his hand on the shoulder of the utterly bewildered detective.

Dan Brown stared from one to the other, unable to solve the mystery. Nor was Rachel less bewildered. This rough, ill-clad, hairy old man her husband? And he, whom she firmly believed to be her husband, to tell her so! Was she going crazy?

"Rachel, what does all this mean?" demanded the detective, advancing, but pausing as she shrunk away with a low cry.

Believing this affright proceeded from his rough disguise, he pulled the cunningly adjusted wig and beard from his head and cast them aside. The false wrinkles of old age, the stain as of sunburn were still upon his face but none who had ever seen the famous detective could doubt his identity now.

Still Rachel shrunk away, if anything with that look of utter horror deepening upon her ghostly-white face, and as Dan Brown extended his hand as though to touch her, a gasping cry parted her lips.

"Never again! back, false-hearted traitor—do not touch me!"

"Rachel, are you mad?" was all the detective could ejaculate.

With a desperate effort, the wronged wife partially regained her composure, but still motioned the detective away. Amazed, fearing she had suddenly and unaccountably gone mad, Dan Brown still advanced, pausing only when the woman, her eyes flashing with hunted despair, turned the muzzle of a pistol upon him.

"Rachel, my wife—what does all this mean? Are you crazy, or am I going mad? You draw a pistol on me—"

A bitter laugh interrupted him. While he was growing more excited as his bewilderment increased, she was growing calmer.

"We both forget that there is a stranger in the room," she said, glancing toward Sol Scott, who had discreetly turned his back upon them, but who could not help hearing every word.

"Madam," he said, turning around, his brow deeply flushed. "I should have left the room at once, but unfortunately I am no longer a free agent. Your husband has arrested me."

"Give me your parole of honor, and wait for me in the office below," hurriedly said Dan Brown.

"I will make no attempt to escape, sir," and bowing first to one, then the other, Sol Scott left the room.

"Now, Rachel, please explain," said the detective, with a strong effort of will succeeding in keeping his emotions under control. "I left you safe at home, only a week ago—I find you here—merciful heaven! it was you—that woman in man's clothes!"

"Wild, reckless—terribly altered for the worse, am I not?" the woman laughed, bitterly. "But who is to blame? you—the lying, plotting, double-faced traitor and would-be assassin!"

Dan Brown stood before her, dumbfounded by the avalanche of bitter epithets hurled at him. She noted his bewilderment, but set it down as shame and confusion at being unmasked, and again she laughed scornfully, contemptuously.

"I have saved you the trouble of sending for me, or mayhap I passed your cunning lure on the road. I am here—to tell you that at last my eyes are opened, that now I know I loved a devil in human guise, rather than an archangel on earth, as I fondly believed! I came to tell you that I have discovered all—and then to die, to kill myself, and save your hand from one more crimson crime."

With a panther-like leap Dan Brown reached her side and obtained possession of the weapon she bore. With a strong arm he placed her upon the sofa, then knelt at her feet, holding both her hands in his, to keep her from doing herself a mischief.

"Now, Rachel, you must explain. You have made terrible charges, have hinted at some horrible treachery in connection with your husband—"

"Husband! I have none! From your own lips I heard the damning truth!" she cried, her

voice trembling but her eyes flashing scorn unutterable.

Dan Brown stared at her in bewilderment. Either he was wholly at a loss to understand what she meant, or else he was a most finished actor.

"No husband—from my lips you heard that!" he cried. "Rachel, for the love of Heaven, tell me what you mean! You are not mad?"

"You have changed your plan, then? Instead of murdering me outright, you think your secret can be buried in a mad-house."

"Rachel, you have said too much not to say more. You must tell me what terrible thing you are hinting at. As your husband, I have the right to demand this."

"You are not my husband—you never was! Stop! think not to deceive me with plausible falsehoods. From your own mouth you stand condemned—and that you may know how utterly you have been unmasked, listen."

In rapid words she told all that has been laid before the reader; of the visit of Ezra Drake, his story, the investigation which followed, the terrible revelation to which she had listened on the stage of the theater, and of the unmasking of the traitor.

"It was your voice I heard, your face I saw when your mask fell. There, sir, is the explanation you demanded—the reasons why I said you were not, never had been my husband."

In stony silence Dan Brown had listened from beginning to end, though several times he could with difficulty refrain from interrupting her recital. Now, pale, even through the disguising stain, her blue eyes shining like polished steel, he spoke:

"Rachel, I do not blame you for the mistake you have fallen into, after what I have heard. But I swear by my hopes of heaven—by the love I feel for you—by the bones of my sainted mother—that you have made a horrible mistake. I never uttered those words. I did not attend the masquerade, because I was not in Denver at that time."

"I saw—I heard. Can ears and eyes lie?" coldly demanded Rachel.

"In this case they have. Poor girl, how you must have suffered!"

"No! never again!" Rachel cried, pushing him back as he sought to clasp her in her arms. "It was you I saw—you I heard declare that I was not your wife—that you loved me not, only her! And then you told how you would remove me from your path, lest I should accuse you of bigamy!"

With an effort the detective restrained himself, and bowed his head for a moment in deep thought. Then he looked up, and there was a glad light in his eyes. Grasping the bell-cord, he pulled it, then sat down upon a chair near the sofa. In a few moments a colored bell-boy rapped at the door, and Dan Brown bade him enter.

"I wish you to find the city marshal, Mr. Ellis, and bring him here as quickly as possible. And on your way, bid the landlord please step up here. Take this for your trouble—and there's the mate to it waiting for you if you bring the marshal here inside of half an hour," he said, giving the dandy a five dollar gold piece.

Grimacing from ear to ear, the delighted boy retreated.

A few moments later the host, D. W. Winkle, made his appearance. Curious as the proverbial woman, his interest had been aroused to a painful pitch by the strange going and coming of that evening, and had lost no time in obeying the request, hoping thus to get at the bottom of the mystery.

"Mr. Winkle, this lady is my wife, I am Dan Brown—"

"Not the great detective, who—" spluttered the excitable landlord.

"The detective, great or little, as that happens," coolly interrupted Brown. "I requested your presence for the purpose of asking your opinion of the city marshal, Samuel Ellis. Is he reliable, trustworthy; can his word be depended upon?"

"I'd sooner believe his bare word than the sworn oath of almost any other man of my acquaintance," declared Winkle.

"That will do. Many thanks for your kindness, sir," and Dan Brown politely bowed the reluctant host out of the room.

"Now, Rachel, a few words with you before my messenger returns. First, tell me whether that masquerade came off at the time intended—the night after I parted from you."

A silent nod was the only answer.

"Very well. If I prove to you that I was not in Denver on that night, will you believe that you mistook some other man for me?"

"I saw, I heard; it was your face, your voice. I went to the office. They knew nothing of you. I went to the stage office. They knew you well, and said that you had not taken the stage, though you had engaged a place," coldly responded the woman.

"I was sent on very important business, and if an inkling of my movements should leak out, our plans might be ruined. For this reason, I directed that such an answer should be given to every one at headquarters, should any inquiries be made about me."

"As for the stage, I lingered a little too long with you, and missed it. I took a horse and joined the stage not ten miles from town. One of my fellow passengers was Mr. Samuel Ellis, the marshal of this place. He brought me some important information concerning a gang of road-agents operating in this vicinity and known as the 'Owls.' He came highly recommended, and as he might be of considerable help to me in my plans, the chief introduced us, and we came here together.

"You know that you took me by surprise when I found you here, and you know that I have not spoken a word to any one since that you have not heard. Any collusion, then, with Mr. Ellis, is simply impossible. If he confirms my oath—that I was not in or near Denver at the time you believe you saw me—then surely you will admit your mistake?"

Rachel made no reply, for that moment footsteps approached, and on the door being opened, the marshal of Golconda entered.

Dan Brown gave the boy his promised reward, then closed the door.

"Mr. Ellis, my wife. A little misunderstanding, which I will explain sometime, led to my sending for you. You remember the date on which you left Denver last?"

"On the tenth of this month, at nine o'clock in the evening," promptly replied Ellis, accepting the chair offered him.

"When and where did you first meet me?"

"Between four and five o'clock that same afternoon, at the head-quarters of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association."

"What brought about that introduction? You can speak freely. I will answer for the discretion of my wife," added Dan Brown, as the marshal visibly hesitated about replying.

"I never doubted her, but you remember we were bound to strict secrecy and great caution. But the cause is easily told.

"I went to Denver, having learned some important facts concerning the Owls. I suppose I could have worked them up myself, but as I am so well known around here, I thought it best to have a man sent out who could not be suspected. You were the man chosen by the chief, and so we were introduced."

"Where and when did I join the stage?"

"A few miles out of Denver. You explained that you had been delayed, and so missed connection."

"How often have you seen me since that hour?"

"Every day, and dozens of times each day."

"Could I possibly have been in Denver on the night of the 11th?"

"In spirit, possibly, but assuredly not in body. You were in the coach with me, that night, as I well know. When we upset, you sat down on my stomach so hard that I've had the nightmare ever since!" declared the marshal, with a rueful smile.

"I am a thousand times obliged for your kindness, Mr. Ellis, and hope to repay you, some day," warmly cried Dan Brown.

Taking the hint, Ellis arose and bowing to the lady, departed.

Closing the door, Dan Brown turned toward Rachel, and held out his arms. One moment of hesitation, then she was reclining upon his breast, sobbing as though her heart would break.

She believed his truth now, but who was his evil "double?"

CHAPTER IX.

SOL SCOTT LIFTS HIS MASK.

WITH Rachel Brown, it was all or nothing.

The clear and irrefragable proof offered by her husband that he was many miles away from Denver at the moment she was eavesdropping the damning words of the masked cavalier whose face bore such a wonderful resemblance to his as to deceive even a wife, restored all her love, all her faith, and she now believed that this mysterious "double," in connection with sundry others—among them Ezra Drake, the hunchback, and Rose, his daughter—was cunningly plotting the ruin of the original and genuine "Dan Brown of Denver."

"Whoever he is, he is to be dreaded," said the detective, thoughtfully, "for no common rascal could have pieced together such a cunning patchwork of truth and falsity, or have told you what that hunchback did about my movements. I don't mean my not taking the stage as I told you I would—any one could have learned that—but how could he have found out that I was bound for this place?"

"There is no one employed by the agency—" "None that at all resembles me in face. There was one—poor Thorold—but you know how he died in my place, when we were fighting the Moonshine gang. No; my "double" cannot belong to the force. Yet he must—I cannot see through it! Only three others, besides me, in Denver, know aught of my coming here, on duty. Surely, neither one of them can be plotting against me!"

It was hardly a question, though put with a rising inflection, for Dan Brown felt sure that neither of those three men were traitors or had aught against him.

"There is only one man in the world whom I have seen, except on that terrible night," said Rachel, slowly, after a space of puzzled silence, "whom I could mistake for you, even when in disguise. That is the man who calls himself Sol Scott."

"The very criminal I was sent here to arrest!" exclaimed the detective, a fresh cloud passing over his brow. "I never had a harder duty—he is a noble fellow, even if his hands are red with human blood. I have arrested him, and he will have to hang, but I would gladly give a year of my life if I could save him."

"He risked his life to defend me from further insult," said Rachel, a vivid flush suffusing her face as she remembered her mad folly. "You must release him, for my sake."

"I saw it all, and hardly knew how to act. I knew he was the man I had orders to arrest, dead or alive, but when he stood up so boldly before those long odds, something held me back. Better a sudden death like the one he was darning than the noose."

"But why did he interfere in your behalf? You never met him before?"

"Only on the street as I was going to the saloon in search of you. He spoke to me on the bridge, and the sound of his voice gave me a dreadful start—for I could almost have sworn it was you speaking! Though I was hunting for you, I fled, half-crazy. You know—you have not forgotten the terrible words I heard at the theater—"

"And thought I meant to fling you over into the river?"

"I was half mad—forgive me," murmured the wife.

"I can make allowance. I know that the evidence must have been fearfully strong and complete, before your love and trust in me gave way. Heaven pity the cunning scoundrels when we meet, for I'll show them no mercy!"

The last sentence was uttered with an intensity that startled Rachel. Never before had she known her husband so wrought up. He saw her face pale, and the black frown left his face.

"I will go and bring Sol Scott up here. We both owe him our thanks, and it is barely possible that he can throw some light on this dark mystery," he said, arising and leaving the room.

He found the miner quietly awaiting him in the office, talking with the city marshal, who had not the faintest suspicion of his being under arrest, or accused of any crime.

Bidding Ellis good-night, they returned to the room where Rachel awaited them. Then Dan Brown said, gravely:

"In justice to both my wife and myself, Mr. Scott, I must ask you to listen to a strange story. It is barely possible that you may be able to throw some light on the subject."

Clearly and rapidly Dan Brown repeated the story he had heard from the lips of his wife, omitting nothing of moment. Sol Scott listened intently, but at the end shook his head negatively.

"The whole affair is as much a mystery to me as it possibly can be to you. Indeed, how could I know anything of the matter? I have not been outside of Golconda for several months."

"Your word is enough, and I ask pardon for my suspicions," responded the detective. "But they were not unnatural. My wife mistook you for me, in disguise. And then, you defended her—"

"And with a woman's curiosity, Mr. Scott," blushed Rachel, "let me ask why you dared such heavy odds in my behalf? Surely you did not recognize me in that odious disguise?"

"No, madam," and the miner bit his lip to conceal a rising smile. "I was blinder than you, for I made a more unpardonable mistake. I took you for much the same as did Vernon Shadutz—but still, you were a woman, and as such, had a claim on all true men—or even a red-handed fugitive from justice, such as I!"

"Mr. Scott, this places me in a very painful position—"

"It need not. You know your duty, sir, and are sworn to perform it. Besides, twice this night you have saved my life. Balance that against the little service I was fortunate enough to render your wife, and call the account even," coldly said the miner.

"I do not believe you can be guilty of murder!" Rachel impulsively cried. "You have been wrongfully accused—I feel it!"

"You are wrong, lady," returned Sol Scott, a faint tremor in his voice, a moisture creeping into his eyes. "I killed the man for whose death I stand accused; but I had most bitter provocation. I never cared to tell the whole truth of the affair, before, but I should like you to know me as I am—not as the cold-blooded assassin the world execrates. If it would not be asking too much, and you would listen—"

"With pleasure—because I hope still that you may be saved—in honor—but saved you shall be, unless I have lost all wifely influence by my mad escapade!" cried Rachel.

"Not with my consent shall you ever ask your husband to break his oath," firmly said the prisoner. "He has arrested me. He must duly turn me over to the authorities. I am not

in love with life, for the last tie that bound me to earth was severed a few weeks since.

"Before the war, I lived in Tennessee—was born and raised there. My father, and his father before him, believed devoutly in State's rights, and being thus reared, of course I did not hesitate long in casting my fortunes with that of the South when it seceded.

"I had just been married, to as pure and lovely a girl as heaven ever looked down upon, but not even her charms were enough to keep me from the field when honor called. I raised a company of gallant mountaineers, and fitting them out at my own cost, offered their services to the government.

"I don't mean to bore you with an account of all that we did or did not do. Enough that we saw our share of fighting, and though hardly a corporal's guard remained of my original company, at the end of a year I was a colonel, in command of a regiment of gallant boys as ever bore musket or knapsack.

"During this year, I only visited home and wife on one occasion, and when I bade my wife a tearful good-by, it was with strangely blended hope and fear—for in a few weeks she was to become a mother.

"We were hard pressed then, and I was unable to get leave, even for a day. Then came a message. I was the father of a man-child, and all was going well!

"Two years passed by, and I hardly saw my family often enough for my noble little boy to remember that he had a father—then came the terrible blow that crushed out of existence an entire family—that made me what I now am; a blood-stained fugitive from justice, over whom hangs the shadow of the hangman's noose!

"I had been very fortunate during the war thus far. Not only had I passed through a score of fierce engagements without receiving a single scratch, but every enterprise where I was entrusted with the command, proved successful. This fact, being noted at head-quarters, I was given command of a regiment of cavalry, that my field of operations might be extended.

"It is not for the sake of boasting that I mention the great success that attended my career, but to explain why the enemy were so desirous of either killing or capturing me.

"Among other Federal officers detached for this service, was a colonel of cavalry, Watkins Cowperthwait by name, a brave and daring officer, but one who carried an utterly merciless heart in his breast—one of those men who are more like wild beasts than aught human.

"I learned the whole story from a faithful old negro servant, whom the marauders overlooked, and in time his account of the terrible deed was corroborated by one of the Federal cavalrymen concerned in the affair.

"Colonel Watkins Cowperthwait sought for me at my home, and came near catching me, too. I had only left there at daylight—he came before noon. I had no suspicions of the horrible tragedy I was riding rapidly from, else my good horse's head would have been turned the other way, and I would have shared the fate of my dear ones.

"Enraged at not finding me, as he had confidently expected, Colonel Cowperthwait declared that I must be in hiding somewhere near the place, and threatened both white and black with his direst vengeance if they did not reveal my whereabouts.

"The negro said that the cavalry chief was half-drunk when he came, and as the close search for me through the house, unearthed some rare old wine of which the officers made free use, it is only justice to believe that he was wholly drunk when he gave orders for the wholesale crime that has sunk his soul to the lowest pits of Tartarus.

"He was told, and truthfully, that I had been there, but was now gone, they knew not whither, but he disbelieved their tale.

"One by one the negro servants were strung up to the trees before the door of my house—pulled up, then lowered when half dead—but only to gasp out the same story: they knew not where I was.

"With each failure, the rage of the baffled colonel grew fiercer. To do him justice, he believed them lying to screen me from captivity. And he swore that the truth should be spoken, though he hung every soul on the premises.

"To show his earnestness, he ordered two of the negroes strung up, and let them hang until they were dead. But still the survivors could only repeat their former story, amid their tears and prayers for mercy.

"My wife, leaving our boy-babe asleep in his crib, came forth and pleaded earnestly with the drunken demons for the life of the slaves. Furious, Colonel Cowperthwait drew back his hand and dealt her a blow that felled her senseless to the ground.

"It was hard, wasn't it?" said Sol Scott, with a ghastly smile, as an exclamation of indignant horror burst from the lips of Rachel Brown. "A poor, helpless woman—but there was even worse to come.

"My father, old, blind, almost helpless from a crippling wound received at New Orleans where he fought under General Jackson, hobbled forth, enraged by the lastingly blow, and

with his feeble arm, struck the drunken brute to the ground. It was his last blow—exhausted, he fell. But at command of the monster whom he had struck, a noose was flung over his head and he was hung—like a dog!

"The cavalry commander was furious. In hopes of drawing me to the scene, he ordered his men to fire the building.

"It may be that he was ignorant of the fact that my child was asleep inside. His sin was great enough without charging him with what cannot be proven. Whether he knew it or not, the house was set on fire in a dozen places, and my poor boy was inside!

"When my wife awoke from her swoon, the building was all ablaze—and from the midst of that fiery furnace came the pitiful wails of her idolized infant. There was no chance of saving it then. The brutal hell-hounds had done their work too well. But my wife tried to enter—would have entered to share the horrible fate of her only child, had not she been seized and forcibly restrained.

"To make sure, the soldiers bound her to the trunk of one of the trees, then they mounted and rode away.

"Do you wonder that when the faithful old negro, who afterward sought me out and told me the horrible story, ventured from his covert and went to his mistress's aid, he found her mad—her brain turned by the pitiful wails of the child she was powerless to aid?

"She died before the negro found me. It was better so, perhaps. The light of reason could never have returned to her eyes, for in her poor, shattered brain, those agonizing cries were ever ringing. She died, was buried, and I far away.

"Only my poor old mother was saved, she being away on a visit to some friends.

"Not until after the war ended could I learn the name of the officer in command, but I knew that it was Federal soldiers who wrought this ruin, and from that time on I was an avenging angel. I neither asked nor gave quarter. My men knew my story, and they sympathized with me. They took no prisoners. Day and night we were in the saddle, and the sure rapidity of our blows gained for us a terrible celebrity. Through it all I was blindly hunting for the murderer of my family, but in vain.

The dark days of the South came, but we never surrendered with the main army. We fought our way through to Mexico, and it was years before I again returned to the States.

"I had changed my name and let my beard grow, like this. Only a few intimate friends knew me, and I knew my secret was safe with them. It was in New York city that I found my man, through a friend who had formed one of a wine supper, given by General Watkins Cowperthwait.

"The general was drunk, and boasting over his cups, told the story of how nearly he had come to capturing me. If he had been sober, he would not have blazoned forth his devilish cruelty—but the hand of fate was in it!

"My friend excused himself on plea of sudden illness and came direct to me, telling me the frightful story boasted of by the drunkard.

"Long years had passed, but my heart was bitter and full of vengeance as on the black day when first I learned the horrible fate that had overtaken my loved ones. Like a madman I rushed to and into the room where the drunkard still sat. I killed him among his friends, who were too amazed, or too cowardly to interfere. I emptied two revolvers into his carcass, spurned it with my foot, then fled—not through love of life, but because my old mother still lived, and to save her from shame I would cheat the hangman's noose.

"I did escape; how, I can hardly explain. I was like a madman inside. Outwardly, I was cool enough to disguise myself and lie low in the great city until the first fury of excitement was spent. Great rewards were offered for the discovery and capture of the assassin—but none of those present when the general was killed knew me, and each man gave a different description.

"I made my way out of the city at last. Where I wandered, would next interest you. But I can honestly say that, though blood has stained my hands more than once since that night, I have never willfully wronged a human being, and only killed to keep from being killed.

"I wrote to my mother and told her the whole truth of the story—that the man I killed was he who murdered her husband, my father, wife and child.

"Some way the truth became known and then I was hotly hunted. Still, for her sake, I fled, doubled and twisted like a fox, driven here and there, leading a life that knew no rest or peace. She told me that I had acted rightly, but I knew that she would never survive the shame of seeing her son die upon the gallows.

"About six weeks ago she died. Since then I have not cared what became of me. A friend in Denver told me that I was suspected, and that you would probably be placed on my track, but I was tired of running. Even a death on the scaffold would be better than another year of the life I had been leading.

So I waited here, and when I penetrated your disguise I yielded myself quietly."

"After reading me a lesson such as I shall never forget," said Dan Brown of Denver, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"And me!" interposed Rachel. "Husband, remember what service he rendered your wife. You cannot—you shall not arrest him!"

"You hear?" asked the detective, with a comical shrug of the shoulders. "You are free, Mr. Scott. I shall never arrest you—but others may. Better levant."

"No, that is too much trouble. And the end must come sometime. I shall run no more. Better be taken by you, a gentleman, than some other."

"If he does, I'll never speak to him again!" cried Rachel, looking as though she meant all she said, too.

"If I do, may I be—" bluntly declared Dan Brown. "I'd rather leave the force forever—and I will, too!"

CHAPTER X.

THE CONSPIRATORS IN COUNCIL.

"You see now what a man can do!"

"Say devil, rather!" was the explosive response. "He played with Vern Shadutz just as you or I might play with a year old boy. If I had known him before we entered into partnership, I'd have taken a second thought before bucking against him. He's mighty bad medicine, Gerux."

"Didn't I say as much when you were chuckling over the easy way our work was to be done by your red-haired giant? Didn't I tell you that Dan Brown had no equal on earth with fist, knife or revolver?"

Bitterly as the Frenchman hated the noted detective, there was a trace of triumph in his tones as he spoke of the signal victory gained by Sol Scott—as he believed, Dan Brown.

The two men—Paul Gerux and King Carmichael as they called each other—were seated in a small room situated at the rear of a saloon, by no means savory scented in the nostrils of the Golconda guardians of the peace. A rough table was between them. Water, a bottle of villainous whisky and a greasy pack of cards rested upon the pine plank, but the two conspirators were too busy to devote much attention to these.

They had much to say concerning the thrilling events of the last night, in all of which they had been peculiarly interested, and a portion of which had fallen to their share.

It was their hands that hurled the chairs to extinguish the lights, when Sol Scott and his masked companion held big Shadutz and his "bad crowd" at bay—and it was the voice of King Carmichael that warned the red-haired giant of Sol Scott's unexpected return.

They were still talking busily when a low, peculiar rap came from the other side of the door, startling them into silence for a moment. The signal was repeated, and this time recognized, for Carmichael said:

"It's only Jaybird-beel—come in, you ace of spades!"

The owner of this fantastic cognomen opened the door and entered the room, grinning from ear to ear, bowing and scraping with a queer mixture of fear and impudence.

"Mornin', gemmen; hope I sees yer libely an' feelin' good dis mornin'—powerful dry work walkin' so fur, gemmen," he added, licking his thick lips as he noticed the bottle and saw that it was nearly full.

"Help yourself, dark," said Gerux. "But unless the news you bring is good news, that's the last whisky you'll ever swallow—I swear it!"

There was a malignity in his tones that startled the huge negro, who was drinking out of the bottle, and caused him to start. The fiery compound "went the wrong way," and threw him into a fit of coughing and strangling that came near shutting off his breath forever.

"Too durned bad, boss, you spile nigger's drink," he spluttered, a sullen gleam in his blood-shot eyes. "How I help what udder folk say? Kin I make bad news good news? You tell me, 'nebber say nuffin but what you hear.' Den ef it ain't good—ef it don't suit you, you say 'I kill you, damn rascal!' Don't see no fun in dat way."

"Then you do bring bad news?" snarled the Frenchman.

"How me know? You don't tell me what you want to hear. You say—watch dat room—hear ebery word dey say in dar den come tell me. Nigger listen—he hear heap words—he scratch 'em all down in his head, den he come, as you say. But how he know wedder you tink bad news or good news?"

"Spit it out, and we'll decide, Jaybird," interposed King Carmichael. "Good or bad, if what you bring is worth anything, you shall be paid down on the nail for it."

"Of course," assented Paul Gerux, who just then received a warning kick under the table. "I was only joking. Tell us everything—every word you can remember. By missing one word, we may lose the key to the whole."

"Steady, and begin at the beginning. Take your time, boy."

The negro obeyed. Fortunately there is no necessity for transcribing his report in full.

Jaybird-beel as he was known throughout Golconda, was the porter of the Parker House. A cunning rascal, fond of money and whisky, he had more than once been of service to King Carmichael, and by him was introduced to Paul Gerux. Liberal pay bought the negro soul and body, and he faithfully carried out his instructions.

These were to keep a close but secret watch over Mrs. Dan Brown; to mark her comings and goings; to note her visitors, if she had any, and learn who and what they were; to overhear the conversation that passed between them in private, if possible.

All this he had done, and now brought his report.

He told how the woman he was set to spy upon, left her room on the evening before, dressed in man's clothing. He meant to follow her, but landlord Winkle caught him while stealing away, and set him to work. He saw her return, accompanied by Sol Scott, whom she took up to her room.

At this a furious curse broke from the lips of Paul Gerux, and the negro spy ducked his head and threw up one arm as if he expected a blow to follow.

"Dished, by —! I could have sworn she would have used a knife on him the moment they met—"

"That accounts for his defending her against Shadutz and his crowd!" interpolated Carmichael. "He must have penetrated her disguise at first sight. Go on, dark."

The black spy resumed. He had secured a position from whence he could see into the parlor and overhear all that was spoken therein. With remarkable fidelity he repeated the speeches of both Sol Scott and Rachel Brown, and when he came to where the woman vainly attempted to unmask her visitor, the two men again interrupted him with exclamations of wonder. They had been so sure that Sol Scott was Dan Brown in disguise. And Paul Gerux still believed so, though he cursed himself for not being able to explain the seeming mystery.

"I don't see why he should deny her!" he muttered.

"Natural enough," said Carmichael, with a low laugh. "She unmasked him while walking with a very charming woman."

"Do you know, I begin to believe that we must have overdone that piece of business?" growled Gerux, but abruptly ceasing at a significant look from his fellow conspirator.

The negro was listening curiously, but as the Frenchman turned upon him, he dropped his eyes and resumed his report.

He was on the watch when Sol Scott returned to the hotel, accompanied by Funny Felix from Frisco, and scenting further information, he hastened back to his place of espial and eavesdropping.

He told them all that passed, greatly to their amazement. Time and again he was interrupted by the astounded conspirators, and required to repeat his words.

"I felt sure that Sol Scott could not be our bird, from the first," declared Carmichael. "But who would have suspected that old cuss? I never doubted him for a moment. If he is really Dan Brown, then we have got our hands full, for he could deceive the very devil himself!"

"Dis nigger must go, now, gemmen, ventured Jaybird-beel, as they appeared to have forgotten his presence. "De boss gib me de debbil fer bein' way so long, I specka, anyhow. Mebbe turn me off."

"That would never do, just now, when we need your services more than ever," exclaimed Gerux. "You must manage to keep your place, even if he does cut up rusty. Mind, you must watch the lady closer than ever. Overhear every word that is spoken in her room, and forget nothing."

As he gave this caution, Gerux handed the eager negro a twenty dollar gold piece. He paid liberally, but he was playing for a very rich stake.

"Nebber fear fo' dis nigger, long as de yaller birds is on han', gemmen!" exclaimed the delighted spy, bowing and scraping back from the room.

For some little time after his departure, the two conspirators sat looking at each other in doubt and amazement.

The report of their spy had rendered necessary a complete change in their plans. And not only that, but the cunning work already so carefully wrought out had been frustrated.

They believed they had separated man and wife forever, by a diabolically cunning scheme, but now they found them reunited and more dangerous than at first, since they knew that unscrupulous enemies were plotting against them.

"If he is the man you say, it will be a black look-out for us when he once strikes our trail," muttered Carmichael.

"Our tracks are covered carefully. We know him, now, while he is all in the dark as to who his enemies are. We can—and must—wise

him out before he can puzzle through the clouds. You are even more deeply interested than I am. He came here expressly to hunt you down. Sam Ellis has ferreted out some of the secrets of the Owls, and sent for him to carry the matter through. Dan Brown—though he would hardly recognize me as Paul Gerux—believes me one of his best friends; as I was until he introduced me to his wife."

"You don't mean to give over your schemes concerning her, then?" asked King Carmichael.

"Not much. I mean to win her for a wife—and then retire from business as detective, and enjoy myself with her wealth."

"If she ever finds me out the part you played on that night, I pity the old hunchback, Ezra Drake," laughed the other. "She would bore your brain-piece with a blue pill, or slip a knife between your ribs, husband or no husband."

"If she ever makes the discovery—yes. But let that pass. Now that we know Sol Scott is not Dan Brown of Denver, you will give over your little plan?"

"I can't, even if I would. He killed Vernon Shadutz—or was the cause of his death. Shadutz was lieutenant of the Owls. We have an inviolable rule among us that death shall be the penalty for harming or killing any one of the family. Blood calls for blood, and Sol Scott is as surely doomed to death as though already rotting in his grave."

"You know young Shadutz—Rucker—was fugged by Ellis, for trying to shoot Scott, last night. Yet one of the boys managed to get word with him, and he demanded that we avenge his brother's death and carry out our sacred oath. We can't refuse. This very night Sol Scott will be taken prisoner and conveyed to our stronghold, there to be placed on trial for his life. You can easily guess what the end will be."

"I will go with you and see what sort of metal the fellow is really composed of, when certain death threatens him. It may be that we can put him to better use than to kill him, and if so, law or no law, rules or no rules, you must give him a little grace."

Carmichael shook his head slowly.

"A reprieve, not acquittal, thickhead," laughed Gerux, significantly. "After his work is done, the shorter his thread of life is cut, the better I shall be suited. He can't escape. Your oath can be kept at any time."

"That may answer, but I don't think you'll find him a very pliable tool. He showed mighty stern metal last night."

"So much the shorter his life, then. But let him go for the present. After all, he is only a secondary consideration. Our greatest danger is from Dan Brown. There is no telling what discoveries he has made while bumming around as Funny Felix from Frisco, and he may be down on you and the band at any moment. When he does strike, he strikes swift and terribly sure!"

"We can watch him, and slip a bit of steel under his hump ribs when he isn't thinking."

"No, that would make her still think him a hero, and she is just one of those romantic women who would live single until death for sake of one she loved. No; he must be killed, but in such a manner as will cover him with seeming shame and disgrace. But *how*—that's the point?"

"Ha! I have it!" cried Carmichael, a devilish smile lighting up his sleepy blue eyes. "We can not only dispose of him forever, but at the same time make enough by the operation to pay our expenses, with a neat little sum over!"

"How?" impatiently demanded the seeming Frenchman.

Carmichael was about to explain his satanic scheme, when a rap was heard at the door, exactly similar to that which had heralded the coming of the black spy.

Gerux arose and unfastened the door. It opened and a tall form entered, being greeted with a cry of surprise.

"Rucker Shadutz!" exclaimed Carmichael. "I thought you were in the jug! Did you break jail?"

"No, there was no need. Sam Ellis came to me a bit ago, and said that Sol Scott would prefer no charge against me, provided I levanted, never to return. He gave me until sunset to get out of the town. If I was found here after that hour, I stand a fair chance of being sent nearer heaven than I would ever be again—at the end of a rope."

Anything but an agreeable object did the young desperado look just then. His naturally handsome face was bruised and cut by the bottles and glasses among which Funny Felix flung him, but still more repulsive was the malignant scowl. Clearly Sol Scott had made a dangerous enemy.

"Of course you mean to go," laughed Carmichael.

"Yes—to the funeral of the dog who killed my brother!" was the fierce, deadly response. "Judge Lynch and his ropes can't frighten me away from Golconda while Sol Scott lives!"

"He will be arrested to-night and placed on trial according to the laws of the family, for the murder of an Owl. To make sure, Shadutz,

you must pretend to levant. Go out of town, and wait for us at the stronghold. I command it!"

"Take him alive, then. I'll drain the heart dry of any man who dares to rob me of my revenge by killing him!" grated the young wrestler, leaving the room.

And then, once more with fastened door, the two conspirators sat by the table, concocting a diabolical plot, the success of which would surely give Dan Brown to a shameful death.

CHAPTER XI.

SENTENCED TO DEATH!

NEARLY a mile from the city of Golconda, up the river, lay the mine known far and near as the "Glory of Alabama"—a rather bombastic name, but after events justified the enthusiasm of the original discoverer, and proved the strike an extraordinarily rich one, even for that region of precious deposits.

The lucky prospectors lost no time in perfecting their claim, developed it sufficiently to reveal its true worth, then sought and found a cash customer, in a "solid" firm of mining speculators.

These gentlemen, after a personal examination, became convinced that there was more money in working the mine for their own benefit than in trying to sell at a profit, and the result was Sol Scott was placed as foreman over a strong force of miners, every ounce of the quartz being reduced by the speculators, own mill.

Where the quartz was so valuable as this, it offered strong inducements for nocturnal thieves and to avoid such losses, a stout log cabin was built in the side-hill near the main tunnel, where the overseer dwelt.

Science was also called into use, and at no time between sunset and sunrise could any person not in the secret enter the mine without causing an alarm bell to ring above the head of the foreman, if at home, or if absent, the wires were connected with a heavy charge of giant powder, whose report, if ignited by the electric spark, would echo much further than Golconda.

It was an early hour of the night next succeeding that on which big Vernon Shadutz met his death.

Sol Scott sat alone in his little cabin—alone with the bitter memories of a bitter past. A guttering candle stood upon the rude table beside which he sat, its flickering rays cast upon a glittering object which he held in his hand—a golden case, now open, containing the painted images of a mother and her child—the portraits of his murdered wife and little son, taken only a short month before their lives ended, and borne away by him as a precious talisman on the very morning of the terrible tragedy.

Telling his tragic story to Dan Brown and his wife, had in a measure broken the icy crust beneath which the hunted man had learned to bide his real feelings, and now, his day's work over, he was indulging himself in a brief un-veiling of his real heart. Bitter tears were rolling silently down his bearded cheeks and falling upon the pictured faces until they grew dim and blurred before his vision.

A cautious tapping sound at the window aroused him from his painful brooding over the past. Swift as lightning the golden locket vanished, and with the same movement the candle was knocked to the floor and extinguished, while Sol Scott himself leaped aside, a revolver in his hand.

These movements, one and all, had been purely instinctive, the result of long years of being hunted by human blood-hounds, for in that moment's glance, Sol Scott saw a face pressed against the little window, and recognized it.

"Hold hard, mate! Is that the sort of reception you give friends when they come to call on you?" cried the clear, ringing voice of Dan Brown of Denver, easily recognizable, even through the closed barriers.

"Who is there with you?"

"Nobody but Funny Felix from Frisco," was the prompt reply. "The other name is too well known for me to shoot it out. Come, old fellow, let me in. Sure as you live I've found out all about that double!"

"All right; wait until I strike a light. I saw your face against the window, and recognized it, but my hand was quicker than my brain," laughed Sol Scott as he struck a match and found the broken candle.

Lighting this and placing it on the table, he unbarred the door and threw it wide open; but terribly was his confidence betrayed!

A swift leap—a still swifter blow, and Sol Scott was hurled to the floor, bleeding and senseless. Quick as panthers, two men were upon him, holding his arms, while a third, either Dan Brown of Denver or his double, knelt upon the senseless miner's chest and thrust a stout gag between his jaws, binding it firmly in place. Then he arose, bearing with him the belt and weapons of the victim of his treachery.

"Bind his arms securely. Dick, bring up the horses. The sooner we are out of here, the better for us all."

As he spoke, Dan Brown's double entered the cabin and extinguished the light, lest it should betray them to some too curious eyes.

Sol Scott was raised from the ground and placed in the saddle, his feet being connected by a stout rope, while another bound him fast to the high-peaked saddle.

By the time this was done, he recovered his consciousness, and glared furiously around him. A mocking laugh rung in his ears, and the man who had so successfully personated Dan Brown of Denver, rode up beside him and flung a heavy sack over his head and shoulders, where it was firmly held in place by stout cords.

"Your eyes are too keen to be left at liberty, just now, Sol Scott," he said, mockingly. "You are bound on a little journey so interesting in scenery that you might be tempted to relate all you saw, only for this precaution."

The prisoner made no response. He had a shrewd suspicion as to the hands he had fallen into, but to breathe this could only render his situation more perilous.

"You are not as talkative as you were last night," added the abductor, a little annoyed. "But be sure we know a way to make you speak in good time."

"Less talk," growled a hoarse, husky voice. "While you are palavering here some of his mates may chance along and trail us home. Spur up—let's get out of this!"

Sol Scott had all his wits about him, despite the dull pain that racked his brain from the ugly blow dealt him, and as the party rode rapidly away from the cabin, he strove to imprint upon his memory the direction they took and the various turns in the trail. For a time he was successful, but then he became confused.

Everybody knows that when one is riding in total darkness, or with the eyes tightly closed, how easy it is to fancy that they are moving in an exactly opposite direction, and how quickly that fancy will seem the truth, even when they know it is false. And if they are helplessly bound and blinded, their very effort to clear their brain will only the more surely confuse them.

Thus it was with Sol Scott, and soon he abandoned the effort as worse than useless. He believed that death awaited him at the end of that journey, and even if he should remember the various crooks and turns, the knowledge would be of little service to him.

For full two hours the party rode rapidly, then drew rein. Sol Scott was lifted from the saddle, two men clutching him firmly by the arms, as though they feared he would give them the slip, blinded and with his arms bound.

He smiled grimly beneath the suffocating sack as he realized how highly his prowess was estimated, and inwardly resolved that his captors should hold a still more exalted opinion of him ere the end, if he was given the slightest chance.

Thus guarded, he was forced onward, and from the echo which followed their footfalls, he knew they were passing into some sort of cavern.

There were several crooks and turns, then the echoes grew more distant, and there was a decided change in the atmosphere, as he could tell even through the muffling sack—a peculiar warm dampness and a scent as of steam.

"Brethren, prepare!" uttered a deep, hollow tone.

Sol Scott felt the grasp upon his arms loosen, but he stood motionless. His trained ear could distinguish shuffling footsteps around, and he knew that he was surrounded. He believed it was intended for him to make a blind dash for freedom, when he would be mercilessly slaughtered, and he smiled grimly as he held his position. Valueless as he held life, he would not knowingly play into their hands.

"Unmask the prisoner!" uttered the same sepulchral tone.

Instantly the cords were cut and the sack snatched from his head.

A strange, weird scene met his gaze.

He stood in a cavern, the extent of which was not clearly revealed by the dim lights. Around him were nearly two score figures, human from the shoulders down, but above that, huge horned owls! Every arm was extended, and every hand clasped a revolver, the grim muzzles all centering on him. A gruesome sight, and one that few men could have gazed upon unmoved. But from the lips of Sol Scott came a short, contemptuous laugh.

"Fire, you masquerading curs—you'll never get a better chance to murder a man! Save your nonsensical mummery to frighten women and babes."

"It is mummery that will end in a tragedy, Sol Scott!" rumbled a cavernous voice, and an owl-headed man came forward and seated himself at the small table, where the red flames arose from two hollow, grinning skulls.

"Go on with your music, then," was the reckless retort. "Any fate rather than be bowed to death by such miserable buffoons!"

"Sol Scott, as you now call yourself," imperturbably added the mask of feathers, "you are arraigned before this tribunal for murder, charged with killing one of the Owls. How do you plead—guilty or not guilty?"

"Tell me the name of the man I am accused of killing, and then I will know better how to answer."

"Vernon Shadutz, he was known to those outside of the family."

"Not guilty, then. The clumsy brute killed himself."

"But you were the cause of his death!" firmly cried one of the Owls, in a voice which Sol Scott instantly recognized.

"Good! I've got one of the Owls marked down!" laughed the prisoner. "Sam Ellis told me you would not sleep easy until you had done me some mischief, Rucker Shadutz."

"What you learn here will never be made known outside of this judgment hall, Sol Scott," sternly cried the chief. "A dozen witnesses are here who can swear that you caused the death of one of the family. A sacred oath binds us to exact blood for blood. The instant Vernon Shadutz met his death, your fate was as surely sealed as though the worms were already batten upon your carcass. Take your last look around you. Never again will your eyes rest upon earthly objects."

"I've faced death too often to play the craven now," quietly uttered the prisoner. "You are wise to make an end of me while you have a chance. I have got a clew to your identity now, and if you fail to make a clean job of it, I swear I'll hunt you down and rid the country of one bitter curse, at least."

"Death—death!" cried the Owls in chorus, plainly enraged by the dauntless threats of the prisoner.

Major Owlet waved his hand imperiously, and the extent of his influence might be estimated by the instant subsidence of those menacing cries.

"If the faintest shadow of mercy had remained in our breasts, prisoner, that reckless speech would have obliterated it. You are doomed. Executioners, lead him to the brink of his grave!"

Two of the Owls replaced their revolvers, and as the line of masks parted, they led Sol Scott forward a few paces, pausing on the edge of a dark abyss, from the black depths of which came a hollow, rumbling sound as of boiling waters, while hot puffs of steam ascended to his nostrils.

"Behold your grave!" solemnly pronounced Major Owlet. "Mortal eye will never look upon your remains, and you will vanish from the world as completely as though you had never been. You were doomed to be cast in there alive—but you are a brave man, and may select a brave man's death, if you wish."

"Choose! will you be first shot, or cast down into those boiling waters, a living victim?"

"If you really mean to give me a choice, I prefer to be shot; if you are playing with me, as I suspect, pitch me over!"

Not the slightest tremor was perceptible in his voice, and even Rucker Shadutz, bitter as was his hatred, could not but stare at him in sullen admiration at his nerve.

"You shall be shot. Brethren, prepare!" rumbled Major Owlet.

Sol Scott was led back a few paces, then left to face his executioners, his back to the black pit. The owl-headed outlaws raised their cocked revolvers, and covered their victim.

"Pray while you can—in ten seconds you die!"

Deliberately Major Owlet counted. At the fatal number the pistols exploded! A hollow groan—then all was still!

CHAPTER XII.

AN ASTONISHING EXHIBITION.

As if by the concussion of the atmosphere, produced by the united report of so many pistols, as the volley was fired the red light in the hollow skulls vanished, leaving all in intense darkness. A deep, blood-chilling groan echoed through the hollow hill, then died away and all was still.

Only for a moment. Then a clear, contemptuous laugh rang out through the gloom, and a voice said:

"You go from bad to worse. Will you never understand that you are dealing with a man, not a child to be frightened by ugly faces and hideous sounds?"

The voice was that of Sol Scott, and as the red flame once more leaped up in the horrible lamps, he stood there confronting his masked enemies, as cool and calm though as ever, a sneering smile curling his bearded lip, a scornful light in his big blue eye.

"We know better, now," uttered the voice of Major Owlet, and despite himself there was strong annoyance perceptible in his tones. "You are a truly brave man. Had you flinched or shown fear before the ordeal, another volley would have immediately followed the first—bullets instead of blank cartridges."

"Then you mean to set me free, afraid to kill a man, even though he be bound hand and foot," sneered Sol Scott.

"Do you love life well enough to fight for it?"

"Free my hands, give me back my weapons, and I'll answer you in deeds, not words," boldly cried the prisoner. "Pick your best men, one, two or a dozen—"

A mocking laugh from Major Owlet cut short his eager defiance, and realizing how he was be-

ing mocked, Sol Scott relapsed into his former cold carelessness.

"Sol! you are not quite so reckless of death as you would have us believe," mocked the outlaw chief. "You would fight, and fight hard for the life you pretend to despise—"

"Not for especial love for it, but because no man cares to die baited by mad-dogs—and because I could kill a dozen or so of your cowardly curs before going under myself," came the taunting interruption.

"Major Owlet," said one of the masks, whom Sol Scott believed was Rucker Shadutz, stepping forth from the ranks. "The prisoner crows loud. He is insolent, and should be taught a lesson. Last night he was kind enough to show us some rare sport before he killed our brother; let us show him some, now."

"You have the right to be heard, my son. Speak plainer."

"A moment since, the prisoner declared his readiness to fight for his life, against one or a dozen of our best men. I propose putting him to the test, and letting him prove whether he was sincere or only boasting."

Major Owlet shook his head slowly. Evidently he did not fancy the proposition thus made.

"There is a great work before us, to successfully accomplish which we will require every arm we can muster. The prisoner, like any other cornered dog, will fight desperately, and even though conquered, as of course he must be in the end, might seriously cripple us."

A harsh, venomous laugh came from the owl's beak.

"I do not mean to place weapons in his hands. The poor fool is so terrified that he would be more apt to hurt himself than any of us. No, it is sport and amusement, combined with exercise that I am after. There are among us men who can wrestle, fence, box—proficients in all manly sports. We practice among ourselves, but that grows tiresome when we have once learned the strength of each man. We may learn some new tricks from the prisoner, and for that reason I make this suggestion. Let his hands be released. Let him face each man who may choose to challenge him in any specialty."

"You are wasting a good deal of breath, Rucker Shadutz," said Sol Scott, with a cold laugh. "I do not feel in an accommodating mood to-night. The only amusement I will furnish you, you can put in your eye."

"A craven—a white feather when it comes to the pinch!"

"Your tongue is no slander. If I had anything to gain by it, I might oblige you by opening your eyes, but I know what the end will be. A bullet or a knife thrust—or maybe a headlong tumble down yonder pit. So cut your mummery short, and make an end of me."

"Major Owlet, I have the most at stake. The prisoner has recognized me by my voice. If he goes free, Judge Lynch will be hot on my trail. But despite this, I repeat what I said, with this addition. If the prisoner fairly conquers each man who challenges him, let him go forth from here, a free man, on solemnly swearing to never make known what he has seen and heard this night."

"You brought the charge—you demanded his punishment according to our laws—if you choose to withdraw your claims, my son, not even I have a right to deny you," slowly said Major Owlet, and as Sol Scott fancied, reluctantly.

Until now he had believed the speech of Rucker Shadutz only part of a prearranged schedule, and inwardly resolved that he would foil them by declining the offer. But the reluctant consent of the outlaw chief gave him hopes that he was offered an actual chance for his life, and he determined to make the best fight in his power.

One of the masks drew Major Owlet aside, and whispered a few words in his ear. The chieftain nodded assent, then returned to his position and raised his hand.

Instantly the subdued buzzing was stilled.

"My sons, you all heard the demand made by your brother owl. If there are any among you who have any reasonable objections to urge against my granting his request, please advance and make them known."

For a moment there was breathless silence, then one of the owls stepped forward and spoke in a shrill voice.

"It is not to object, master, that I speak, but simply to make a suggestion. The prisoner is a desperate man. If his limbs are once freed, knowing that sure defeat awaits him, and in consequence death, he may make an effort to escape. In view of that possibility, I would suggest that all those who do not contemplate testing his skill, as challengers, form a circle, each with his revolver cocked. Also, that you issue orders to them to shoot him down without mercy in case he should make such an attempt."

"It shall be done, my son. Is there any further suggestion?"

"Merely an amendment to the motion of the honorable owl who has just hooted," coolly uttered Sol Scott. "I suggest that the noble guardians who are to form this bull pen, be instructed by your horned and beaked majesty

to shoot down each and every man who attempts to run. That will make it more interesting, and give them something to exercise their weapons on. And I will wager a hat full of gold, that if the honorable owl who shot off his beak before me, will act as one of the challengers, he will be the first one to taste lead."

The masked man thus bitingly alluded to, took one step forward, but paused as Major Owlet raised his hand.

"Those who wish to test the nerve and skill of the prisoner will range themselves beside my throne."

Four masks promptly advanced, among them Rucker Shadutz and the man who had proposed the guarding circle.

"The others will form a double circle, and prepare their weapons. But remember, the one who dares to fire a shot unless the prisoner attempts to escape by flight, shall be deemed guilty of a high misdemeanor, and be cast alive into the boiling lake yonder."

The circle was formed, some ten yards in diameter.

"Cover the prisoner, and I will release him from his bonds."

Sol Scott smiled grimly as he noticed the caution of Major Owlet, and a wild project flashed across his brain—to seize the chieftain and make his life answer for his own—but was banished as quickly as formed. Unarmed as he was, the Owls would riddle him with bullets before he could fairly grasp the Owlet.

Major Owlet quickly severed his bonds, then retreated.

"If your limbs are benumbed, take time to recover their use. You will need all your strength and skill," he said, coldly.

Sol Scott did not slight this caution, and briskly rubbed his arms to restore the circulation, closely scanning the four men with whom he was to do battle. He knew that each one of the quartette must be well skilled in his specialty, else they would never have stepped forward as champions against one who had displayed such prowess against Vernon Shadutz.

He knew that Rucker Shadutz would elect to wrestle, and he knew, too, that in him he would find a more troublesome customer than Big Vern, for he had witnessed displays of his skill on more than one occasion. Only in brute strength was he inferior to his giant brother; in activity and suppleness, far his superior.

Of the others, one was tall, broad-shouldered, with long, muscular arms. Another was small, slender, but evidently tough and wiry as a wild-cat. The last—and Sol Scott noted him most closely of all, for he was resolved to learn him a lesson if it lay in his power, never to be forgotten—was the Owl who had suggested his trying to escape by flight.

He was of the medium height, but so broad-shouldered and massively built as to appear several inches shorter.

His limbs restored to their wonted suppleness, Sol Scott doffed his flannel shirt, appearing in a tight-fitting knit shirt, the sleeves cut off above the elbow, revealing a chest and pair of arms that caused more than one of those forming the circle to secretly thank their stars that they were not among the challengers.

Removing his heavy boots and pants, Sol Scott stood forth in stocking feet and drawers, ready for the fray. As he coolly nodded to Major Owlet, that worthy asked:

"My sons, arrange the order of battle among yourselves."

"I claim the first chance!" hastily cried Rucker Shadutz, advancing and casting off his outer clothing, then his owl's-head mask. "You know me already, Sol Scott, so I can show my face freely. I challenge you to wrestle—best two in three—provided I do not kill you in the first—catch-as-catch-can."

"One moment," coolly uttered the other. "I would ask your horned majesty a little light on one point. You heard what this fellow said just now. He means to kill me if he can. Am I to have the same privilege? Or will what would be all right with him, be murder in me?"

"Major Owlet hesitated, but Shadutz spoke up quickly:

"It is man to man. I ask no chances that are not open to you. Kill me if you can, for I mean to kill you if possible."

"That is only fair," came the shrill voice of the fourth challenger. "Life against life. If one is killed, it is an unfortunate accident, no crime."

"So be it!" confirmed the Owlet from his throne.

Slowly Shadutz began circling around his antagonist, who contented himself with keeping front, his arms slowly moving up and down, ready for an instant grapple.

In this peculiar style of wrestling, the great object is to secure the "underhold," that is, to clasp one's adversary around the body, beneath his arms. In nine cases out of ten, this advantage leads to a fall for the one who secures it.

Suddenly Rucker Shadutz saw his chance and darted in. A murmur of delight ran around the circle, for they saw that their champion had secured the important advantage.

With a desperate struggle Rucker Shadutz strove to lift his antagonist from his footing,

then a gurgling cry escaped his throat as he realized his peril—too late to avoid it!

Sol Scott had intentionally offered the opening so quickly accepted by the young wrestler. He knew that other desperate struggles awaited him, and great as was his strength, extraordinary his bodily powers, he could not afford to expend too much breath and force in a protracted struggle at the outset.

He knew too that his life would never be safe while the brother of the red-haired giant lived—knew that the wrestler meant to kill him now if possible—and he resolved to either kill or be killed at once.

As Shadutz clasped him around the ribs, Sol Scott flung one hand behind his adversary, his wrist crossing the base of his neck, while his right forearm was thrust under his chin.

One mighty effort—then came a distinctly audible snap, and flinging up his arms, Rucker Shadutz fell backward a dead man, his neck broken!

A cry of horror came from the Owls as they realized the terrible truth, and there was an ominous rattle of arms, but the victor stood motionless in the circle, his arms folded, a scornful smile upon his lip, a cold, deadly gleam in his blue eyes. One man defying two—score!

Sharply the Owlet cried out to his men:

"Beware! our word is pledged. Shadutz himself declared that it was to the death. The man who strikes the prisoner now shall die like a dog by my hand!"

"Thanks, your royal highness!" cried Sol Scott, with a mocking bow. "You are more of a gentleman than I thought you. But send in another champion. I am not fairly warmed up yet!"

At a gesture from the Owlet, two masks advanced and bore the dead wrestler outside of the ring, then once more resumed their places.

While thus engaged, the second champion, the tall, broad-shouldered fellow, was stripping for the contest. He removed his outer garments and appeared in the orthodox ring costume, bare to the middle, knee-breeches, stockings and spiked shoes.

Sol Scott smiled grimly. He knew now that all this had been prepared for beforehand, that the scene beside the boiling pit was but the farcical prelude, arranged to shake his nerves.

The second champion of the Owls also discarded his feathered mask, revealing a bull-dog head and features wholly unknown to Sol Scott.

"Stop, job and get away," is it?" laughed the miner, as the big fellow advanced and thrust out his hand cautiously, in true ring fashion for the customary shake. "Well, old fellow, you look like a good 'un, and big enough to swallow me at a single mouthful; but you can't most always sometimes generally tell. I've been there before!"

"Time!" rumbled the deep voice of Major Owlet.

For a few moments the antagonists sparred cautiously, in ring vernacular, "feeling" each other; then, as if satisfied, Sol Scott opened the concert by sending in his right, tapping the big fellow on the nose, leaping back to avoid the counter, laughing maliciously. The blow, though seemingly but a touch, was sharp enough to anger the pugilist, and he followed his laughing antagonist sharply, sending out one fist after the other, but striking naught save air. His distance was judged well enough, but Sol Scott displayed remarkable activity and skill in dodging.

In no other way can an old ring fighter be more surely "rattled," and Sol Scott knew it. He felt that he was the big fellow's master, that he also knew he was a man who would take lots of beating before throwing up the sponge. Two adversaries still awaited him, and Sol Scott could not afford to throw away a chance.

The miner quickly saw a favorable opening, and at once improved it. Ducking under his antagonist's arm as he was pressed close to one side of the circle, he struck him a terrible blow on the neck, driving him back, and almost knocking him off his feet. Swift as thought he followed up his advantage. Once, twice, thrice his fists alighted in the same spot, each stroke driving the big fellow a few feet around the ring—each blow heavy enough to fell an ox, yet still the pugilist kept his feet, though able to do nothing more. He was blinded, bewildered, such a pitiful expression of stupid amazement upon his scarred but good-humored face, that despite himself, Sol Scott laughed aloud and lowered his fists.

"Old fellow, you're the first man I ever put up hands with that I couldn't knock down!" he cried, but little less amazed than his adversary. "Four times I've hit you hard enough to brain a bullock, yet you are still on your pins! What are you made of, anyway?"

The battered pugilist wheeled, but as Sol Scott again put up his fists he shook his head, a sickly smile upon his face, then abruptly sat down on the rocky floor!

"What was it you axed me, pard?" he said, lamely, gulping once or twice as though trying to swallow something which would neither go down nor come up. "That's a hull bungle-bee's

nest inside my head, buzzin' louder'n thunder, an' I didn't jist ketch what you shouted."

"You're down now, though I couldn't knock you down—and I don't believe there's another man on earth who could have stood up under those four blows, if I do say it!"

"My hoofs is so p'izen big, pard?" faintly grinned the pugilist.

"Time!" rumbled the sepulchral tones of the Owlet.

"Time, an' be durned! Come down an' try it yourself!" growled the big fellow, never offering to arise. "Mate, I don't want no more. A hour ago, I thought I was the best man in the mines. A p'izen cuss come to me an' offers me good pay if I would punch the stuffin' out o' some duffer—meanin' you, I reckon. I was 'shoal on the bar'—hedn't the price of a drink about my clothes—an' so I said sartainly. Mind ye, I don't say I'm licked—but I do say that ef we was to go on, you would lick me. An' so, to sorter save my credit, yar's my hand!"

"And mine upon it!" warmly cried Scott. "I am glad to hear that you don't belong to this scaly set. You look like an honest man, and I wish you may never fall into such company—"

"Sare, s'all I have ze honaire?" at this juncture interrupted a voice, and turning, Sol Scott saw that the third champion had entered the ring—the little wiry man, who stood bowing profoundly and extending a long, slender rapier toward him.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN APISH ADVERSARY.

SOL SCOTT stared at the bowing, grimacing champion in wide-eyed amazement, real or pretended.

"Your horned highness," he exclaimed, turning to the Owlet, "I have fought two of your best men; killed one and made it mighty lively for the other. I have shown that I am neither a coward nor a slouch. But having fought men, and being a man myself, I decidedly object to being pitted against a little withered, dried up ape, armed with overgrown darning-needles!"

A low laugh ran around the circle, for the diminutive fencing-master was no favorite with the Owls, being malicious and showing them no mercy while giving them lessons with the foils. Few among them would mourn his fall.

"Sare, you have-a insulted me!" cried the little Frenchman, with a sharp stamp of the foot. "You s'all give-a me satisfactions, sare! Before you spik zem vords, I only sink to read-a you a lessone, but now—monsieur, I s'all kill-a you! I s'all proceed to run-a you t'rough ze stomaque, sare, wiz my darn' needle, sare—got dam!"

"Your majesty hears," coolly said Sol Scott. "Your pet ape plainly declares that he means to kill me, and I as plainly declare that I shall take his life to save my own."

Without more words he grasped the hilt of the proffered rapier, having effected his purpose—enraged his adversary, thus gaining an important advantage where such delicate tools were to be used, for no man can handle a rapier to perfection whose brain is heated by anger.

Eagerly the wiry little Frenchman attacked, their pliant blades twining around each other without clash or clatter, but emitting a peculiar hissing sound not unlike that of an enraged serpent. And even this early in the fight, Sol Scott saw cause for gratulation at having enraged his antagonist. Though the smallest and apparently the most insignificant of all the champions, the fencing-master in reality was by far the most dangerous and difficult to handle. A complete master of his weapon, active as a cat, tough as oil-tempered steel, if need be he could fence "for blood" from the rising till the setting of the sun. His only weak point was his choleric temper.

"Aha!" he snarled, maliciously. "You s'all see zat ze monkee knows to use ze darn' needle! I s'all have-a ze honaire to make-a ze leetle hole t'rough you' suppaire—"

"Meanwhile, there's an air-hole in your front leg," coolly interrupted Sol Scott, as his needle-like blade pierced the sword arm of his antagonist, between the elbow and shoulder.

Quick as thought his weapon was withdrawn in time to parry a vicious counter-thrust, only that marvelous activity and a backward leap saving his throat from perforation.

But little blood followed the withdrawal of his weapon, nor did the wound seem to inconvenience the Frenchman in the least, as far as wielding his rapier was concerned.

But Sol Scott smiled grimly as a fierce curse came from his astonished antagonist. Wilder than ever waxed the rage of the fencing-master, and few among those whose champion he was but began to doubt his infallibility. Fiercely he attacked, slowly driving the cool-nerved miner back and around the circle, whose guard could neither be forced nor penetrated, while every now and then his needle like point punctured the tough skin of his antagonist, warning him of danger. For a moment after each touch the Frenchman would fence more cautiously, but only to allow his devilish temper to flash

out all the more venomously for the brief restraint.

"Have you given me lessons enough, ape—with-the-head-of-an-owl?" mocked Sol Scott, as for the fifth time his keen point pricked the Frenchman. "If so, let's get down to sober business—unless you are ready to own yourself fairly vanquished. If so, take your life—"

His mocking speech was cut short by a furious assault, to guard against which called for all his powers.

Then a scream of frantic delight burst from the Frenchman, as his little weapon passed inside the miner's guard for the first time, and the cry was echoed back by the masks, as they saw the point protrude behind Sol Scott—for they believed the fencing-master had at length made his word good.

But instead of a cry of agony, a taunting laugh came from the lips of the miner.

To end the duel, he had deliberately provoked the thrust by laying himself open. Straight for his heart the keen weapon was plunged, but by a swift, almost imperceptible motion, Sol Scott permitted the rapier to glance along his ribs, drawing in his left arm closely, pinning the weapon to his side. It was smartly withdrawn, but not soon enough to parry the counter-thrust. Swift as thought the miner's long arm was extended and his pointed blade buried half its length in the left breast of the Frenchman.

A wild-beast-like screech of mortal agony—a frantic snatching at the biting blade, then red blood burst from the horny beak of the owl's head and the duelist fell back, his heart punctured, dead ere his carcass touched the ground!

His fall snapped the fatal blade, and Sol Scott stooped to draw the broken point from its bloody sheath, then arose, cold as at first, his blue eyes glowing like white-hot steel.

"Now for you, fellow!" he cried, taking a forward step, but halting as the fourth champion made no corresponding move.

"I don't fight with darning-needles, thank you, sir," said the shrill, peculiar voice, sounding oddly enough when coming from such a stunted Hercules.

"Name your tools, then, for I am anxious to see which one of us will run from the circle first."

"How are you with the weapon of a cavalryman? Can you handle a saber as well as that bit of wire?"

"Better—as I hope to show you ere many minutes. Come! strip yourself and get to work, or these honest gentlemen will conclude that your tongue is your best weapon!"

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not," squeaked the squat Hercules. "I have a young and interesting family hanging around my neck, and really have no right to commit suicide by confronting such an admirable Crichton as you have proved yourself."

"What am I to understand by this?" sternly demanded Scott.

"That I frankly own myself vanquished even without crossing weapons with you," was the composed reply.

"A craven! I thought as much when you suggested such precautions against my running away!" sneered the miner.

"A man of common sense and prudence, rather."

"It matters little what you call yourself. Actions speak louder than words. Well, here I stand, gentlemen, awaiting your pleasure. Are there any more champions among you? If so, don't be bashful. I've just got my hand in, and don't know how I could spend the rest of the night with more profit to the honest portion of mankind than by killing a few more such rascals as those I have already laid to rest forever!"

Silence followed this bold speech. The owl-heads turned to glance at each other, but no one left the line. The wonderful display made by the gladiator, was such that no ordinary man cared to stand up before him in single fight.

Sol Scott laughed mockingly as no one accepted his challenge. Still holding his adversary's rapier in one hand, the point of steel in his other, he moved toward the skin-covered rock on which Major Owlet still sat.

"As no one seems disposed to aid me in creating further amusement for your majesty, I suppose I am a free man!"

"On certain conditions, yes," deliberately responded Owlet.

"The only conditions you first imposed, I have fulfilled," said Sol Scott, calmly, but with an ugly devil in his big blue eyes. "I have met and conquered all who dared face me. You pledged your word that I should go free if I did this. Am I to understand that you mean to break that pledge?"

"Not unless you reject my conditions—"

"If conditions there must be, I prefer making them myself!"

The fourth challenger, him who had owned himself defeated without striking a blow, was the only man standing near the throne, and believing that his life was forfeited any way, Sol Scott resolved on a desperate attempt at revenge.

As he uttered the words recorded above, he

barled his rapier, hilt foremost, full in the face of the squat Hercules, the force of the missile staggering him. Then, with one tiger-like leap, Sol Scott was beside the throne and bending Major Owlet over the table, pressed the point of the broken rapier against the nape of his neck, shouting sternly:

"Back! dare to raise even a finger, and your master dies the death of a dog! And you, Major Owlet, struggle even the slightest, and I sever the spinal cord that instant!"

It was a thrilling tableau.

The defiant gladiator holding the owl-headed chief painfully doubled over the table, his blood-stained weapon resting its keen point directly over the seat of life, his blue eyes flashing defiance at the crowd of weirdly masked men, whose weapons were drawn, but who dared not attempt to use them, lest their chief and master should die.

"Bid your men lay their weapons on the floor, then fall back to the pit, yonder. Hesitate, and by the heavens above us, you die, even though I perish the instant after!"

"Do as he directs," huskily uttered Major Owlet.

Slowly the masks obeyed, disarming and falling back to the edge of the abyss, where they formed in line.

"Hold up your hands, I don't care to trust you gentry too far, after the specimen of double-dealing this sweet-scented beauty has shown. There—that looks better. Remain so until you have my permission to alter your position."

While speaking, Sol Scott, still holding his weapon in place, deftly unbuckled the belt worn by Major Owlet, and first assuring himself that the revolvers were loaded, stepped back a couple of paces so as to command the whole party with the brace of pistols which he deftly cocked.

"Keep your seat, old man, and never mind about turning your head; I'll excuse your back," he cried, as Major Owlet made a motion to arise. "Now ask my pardon for the treachery you showed me—"

"D—d if I do!" growled the enraged outlaw.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PRICE OF DAN BROWN'S LIFE.

SOL SCOTT laughed pleasantly at this blunt defiance.

"That sounds more like a man than anything I have heard you say yet. A few more hours of association with a gentleman, and you will be quite decent company."

"You can mock, because you have me foul," growled Major Owlet. "But one thing is sure. You can never escape from this stronghold alive, to boast of how you played with the Owls. You can kill me, but before you can fire a second shot, the crowd will be on your back for vengeance."

"I don't place a very high value on my life," laughed Sol Scott, "but I am not such a fool as to exchange it for yours alone."

"Come, call a truce," squeaked the squat Hercules. "Let's talk the matter over more at our ease—"

"Still there in the open?" sneered the miner. "I thought I saw you dodging under the table, to save your precious carcass."

"My dear sir," was the cool response, "you are annoyed because I showed myself a man of more sense than my fellow challengers—because I would not consent to stand up and let you knock me down, slash and carve, cut and thrust just as though I didn't cost anything. I frankly owned that you were my master at fighting, and withdrew my challenge, not altogether because I feared death at your hands, but because I had more important work for you to do."

"One would think, to hear you talk, that you were running this show. Who are you, anyway?"

"One who saved you from being butchered without having even a ghost of a show for your life," squeaked the mask. "If you doubt my word, ask Major Owlet who commands here."

"You do," was the gruff response. "The fellow would have been boiled into soup long before this, if you had let me have my way—and two of my best men would not be dead!"

There was no counterfeiting in this speech, as Sol Scott felt well assured. The outlaw chief was deeply chagrined at being thus humiliated before his men.

"My word here is law, Mr. Scott," resumed the mask, "and were I to give the signal, yonder Owls would pounce upon you claw and beak, even though they knew their first move meant death to Major Owlet."

"Before they could reach a weapon, both he and you would be past saving," shortly threatened Sol Scott.

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no; but let us hope it will not come to that extremity. Drop your weapons and let's arrange matters. I pledge my honor that no advantage shall be taken—"

"I haven't the slightest doubt of that," dryly interjected the miner. "I've had a sample of honor, already."

"You made conditions with the wrong man, that's all," laughed the mask. "You were my prisoner, and Major Owlet's pledges were not

binding to me, unless I so pleased. But now, whatever I agree to, will be fulfilled."

"You were captured and brought here to suffer death, according to the rules governing the Owls. No mortal power but mine could have saved you. I saw you handle yourself last night, and I knew then that if there lived a man who could kill Dan Brown of Denver, you were he."

"So, you picked me out to do an assassin's work?"

"Would it be the first time?" swiftly retorted the mask.

Sol Scott flushed hotly, then turned pale as death. There was a dangerous light in his blue eyes, and never before had the squat Hercules stood nearer death's door than in that moment.

"I have spies who serve me well, Sol Scott—if that is the name of your choice," quietly added the mask. "I did not know you were other than you seemed, last night, but before noon to-day, I knew all about you."

"Indeed?" sneered the miner.

"That you were arrested by Dan Brown of Denver—that you and he went together to the Parker House, where boards the lady you rescued from Vernon Shadutz—that she is Dan Brown's wife—that you told them the story of your past life and the crime for which you were hunted down—"

"An adroit spy, truly," coldly interrupted Sol Scott, "but could he read between the lines?"

"I don't know as I exactly understand you."

"Many a smarter man has said that before you, old fellow," retorted Scott, laughing softly. "After all, what do you know of me?"

"Enough to hang you, if I chose to hand you over to justice. I know that there is a reward of twenty thousand dollars still offered for your capture, dead or alive—"

"Double that amount, and you would be more right," coolly said the miner, "though you would have to visit half a dozen States to collect the blood money. You seem to know part of my history. You know that I fled from New York, just ten years ago, with the life-blood of an enemy on my hands. But you don't know how those ten years were spent; you don't know what various shapes and disguises the ex-colonel of cavalry assumed. Shall I tell you?"

"In Mexico I earned the name of *El Diablo*. In Texas men turned pale with fear when they heard whispered the name of Captain Satan. In California, I was the Death King, while in Nevada I gained some little notoriety as Steel-spring. Other names I have been given, but these are the widest known."

In silent awe the Owls gazed upon the speaker, while even the squat Hercules involuntarily shrunk back. Each one of the titles enumerated, had been borne by a reckless and merciless dare-devil in the days gone by, who had proved himself a terrible scourge to the regions infested. Crimes enough were laid at the door of each, black enough to damn their author forever. It did not seem possible that one man alone could have performed all these—and yet, after what they had that night witnessed of his marvelous prowess in three widely different fields, nothing seemed impossible after all.

Low and mockingly Sol Smith laughed as he noted the effect of his disclosure.

"Do you wonder now at my reckless disregard of life? A thousand times I have seen it trembling in the balance—seven separate nooses have been drawn around my throat—yet I still live, and have come to believe that I will never die with my boots on."

"If you are all that you claim, then more than ever am I glad that I saved your life," said the mask, slowly.

"That I may do the dirty work, you are afraid to attempt?" mocked Sol Scott. "I have led too long to act as any man's tool now. Besides, Dan Brown is a white man—white clean through. By a trick he arrested me, but because I chanced to serve his wife, he set me free again."

"Because your wife pleaded for you, and he had particular reasons for not crossing her will, openly at least. But last night Dan Brown posted a letter—here it is, the seal yet unbroken—but I wager my right hand I can guess its contents from the address."

The red light from the skulls shone upon the white envelope, and Sol Scott read the address at a glance.

It was directed to the Chief of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association, at Denver, Colorado.

"He pledged his word not to arrest you, but warned you to levant. You refused. He wrote this letter and mailed it. I can read its contents with my eyes shut—and so can you."

"You think he sent for another detective to come and make the arrest?" asked Sol Scott. "If I thought as much—"

"Possibly I wrong him, but that is soon decided," said the mask, tearing open the letter and unfolding it.

A mocking laugh parted his lips as he noted the contents.

"He says that you are here, but does not wish to make the arrest lest the Owls should

discover his presence. He asks that a good man may be sent out to take you in."

With a dark frown Sol Scott took the letter and read it himself. The mask had spoken truly.

"If I knew he really meant such treachery—"

"You hold the proof in your hand," quickly said the mask.

"Bah! I have seen bolder tricks than that played. You might have written this—and far more likely to than Dan Brown of Denver," bluntly cried the miner.

"That can be readily proven," calmly returned the mask. "I will seal the letter again. They will think nothing of the direction being in a strange hand, for naturally Dan Brown would not want his presence here suspected, and the postmark might tell tales at the Denver office, where his hand is known. Inside of a week, the new detective will be here. Dan Brown will point you out to him. When he makes the arrest, you will be convinced."

"No doubt," dryly uttered Scott. "That would be convincing!"

"You are hard to please," laughed the mask. But jesting aside, Dan Brown wrote that letter. If the man sent for don't come inside of a week, he will write again. His honor is pledged at the office to bring you to justice. It is either your life or his. Take your choice."

"Tell me why you are so set on his death?"

"That is none of your business, but still I will explain. Dan Brown came here to break up the Owls, just as he did the band of Captain Moonshine. I am interested in this family, and besides that, Captain Moonshine was one of my nearest friends. For these reasons I have sworn that the detective shall die. I came here, intending to do the work, but now that I have got a hold on you, I prefer taking my revenge through a deputy."

"Suppose I refuse, what then?"

"You will never leave this stronghold alive! But you will not refuse. You know that Dan Brown has dealt you one treacherous blow in the dark, and feel that he will not hesitate to follow it up with others, if necessary."

"You will not be satisfied with anything less than death? Would not his disgrace answer as well?"

"No, he must die," came the stern response.

"What security have you that, once away from here and a free man, I will not break what pledges you may exact, and betray you and these fellows?"

"The very best of security. We all know you, while you are in utter ignorance concerning us. True, you may suspect, but suspicion does not go far. You were brought here blindfolded, and you will be taken away in the same manner. If you had the nose of a bloodhound, you could not retrace your steps. And should you try, you die. Unsuspected by you, one or more Owls will be watching you both night and day. Your every movement will be noted, your every word overheard and brought to me."

"You have seen none of our faces, save those of Rucker Shadutz and Turk Elder. One of those lies dead, the other knows no more than you—for he was brought here in the same manner. Even our voices and our forms have been disguised. You might pass any one of us on the street within the hour, and never suspect our identity."

"I speak frankly, for I want you to understand that there is only one course open for you to follow. Good man as you are, a knife-thrust in the dark, a bullet from ambush, or a sprinkling of strychnine on your meat can lay you low; and if Dan Brown is alive at the end of a week, or you attempt to give us the slip by levanting, you will die by one of these methods."

"You talk plain and to the point—as will I," boldly returned Sol Scott. "I pledge you my word as a brother rascal that Dan Brown of Denver shall die—on one condition. If you refuse that, then do your worst, and I'll die making my teeth meet in the flesh, with lots of good company."

"Make known your condition—what do you demand?"

"Mrs. Dan Brown is a very beautiful woman," was the slow response. "She is full of the right kind of grit, too. I think she and I would make a double team hard to beat. Aid me to win her, and Dan Brown is as good as a dead man!"

Clearly the mask was astonished by this demand, but he quickly overmastered his emotions, and his voice was even as ever.

"We will do what we can for you—abduct the lady and bring her here for you, if desired. And more. If you will accept the position of chief over us, I am sure Major Owlet will be delighted to serve under you as chief officer. This, when Dan Brown is safely under the sod, of course."

"That will be inside of a week," cried Sol Scott, his eyes glowing, an exultant ring in his voice.

"All is settled, then. Put on your clothes, and we will start on our return journey. It is a long trail, and we must reach Golconda before day dawns."

Sol Scott returned the confiscated weapons to Major Owlet, and received his own instead. He quickly donned his garments, and quietly submitted to having the heavy sack tied over his head and shoulders. He no longer anticipated treachery, for there was a bond of blood between them.

Then the cavalcade rode on like grim phantoms of the night.

CHAPTER XV.

"OPENING A BANK."

It is doubtful if there was a man in Golconda who felt more content with himself and the world than did Edward P. Rolfe, Esquire on the Saturday evening following the strange doings in the Owls' stronghold.

In the first place, Mr. Rolfe was a faithful follower of Epicurus, whose precepts he wisely interpreted as a gastronomical artist, not as a gluttonous gourmand. He had spent the last two hours at the table in his rooms at the Parker House—for the worthy epicure deemed it sacrilege to feast before the eyes of the vulgar herd who only ate to live—and was now slowly strolling along the street, in blissful consciousness of having done his whole duty by himself and his stomach.

There was still another reason, Mr. Rolfe was the sole owner of the only bank Golconda could boast of. His financial standing was prime, his word considered as good as any other man's bond, and all who was fortunate enough to be blessed with spare cash, banked with Mr. Rolfe. Among his heaviest depositors of course were the mill-owners and their largest customers. Saturday was the regular "cleaning up" day, when the precious products of the mighty stamps whose thunder had not ceased for six days, were collected and either sold to dealers or express company, or deposited in the big vault of the bank for present keeping. And never before since Golconda had a name and a habitation, had so much wealth crossed the counter of the bank as on this particular Saturday.

A jolly, whole-souled fellow—thus was banker Rolfe estimated by those who had more intimate dealings with him. Semi-occasionally he would go "on a tear," to use his own expression, and for a month afterward would secretly admire himself as a most delightfully reckless and immoral fellow. This "tear" consisted for the most part in treating everybody to the best the town afforded, and in drinking enough wine to set his sedate brain to dancing a little. And regularly the next morning the repentant rioter would send for the city marshal and request a full repetition of his last night's exploits—how many men he had killed or disabled; for though he had never had a personal difficulty in his life, and hardly knew the muzzle of a revolver from its butt, banker Rolfe believed that, when in his cups, he was a terrible desperado, who would "fight at the drop of a hat." On this point alone, he was a trifle cracked; in business hours and business dealings he was sharp as a steel-trap.

His weak side was getting the better of him now. When he sat down to his daintily prepared supper, Mr. Rolfe intended to quit the table for his virtuous couch, but this good resolution gave way before the subtle temptings of the malicious devil, and when the banker left the hotel, it was with the firm intention of "making a night of it."

"If I could only keep cool—if my passions were not so terribly strong and unruly when they once awake!" he murmured, self-admiringly. "I know that somebody will be hurt before morning, for I am awful when I once get started! Hello!"

Two men stepping briskly along, separated as they overtook the banker, and each slipped one arm through his.

Just there the street was dark, the moon being hid behind one of the square fronted buildings, and though Mr. Rolfe stared curiously at first one, then the other, he could recognize neither of his companions, though of course they must know him—only intimate friends would act so unceremoniously.

"Keep a quiet tongue between your teeth, old codger," growled one of the men, in a deep, unpleasant tone of voice. "No nonsense, unless you are eager to shuffle off this mortal coil!"

"One squeak above your breath, and you'll ride in the lead team of a funeral to-morrow, sure!" added the other man.

"It's a good joke, gentlemen—a capital jest, but—thunder!"

If a jest, it was a decidedly disagreeable one. The man on his left thrust the cold muzzle of a revolver against his temple, while the one holding his right arm, pressed the keen point of a long knife against his throat.

"Go easy! Another sound like that, and you'll get hurt, bad," came a warning whisper. "Walk straight on. If we meet anybody, don't speak unless they address you first. Then pass the time of day, but don't try to stop, or arouse their curiosity. If you do, you will die that moment!"

Banker Rolfe began to realize the terrible truth. This was no jest, but a disagreeable

reality. These were genuine ruffians—most likely some of the dreaded Owls—who meant to rob if not murder him; possibly both.

The banker was not an over brave man; many would have deemed him an arrant coward. Certain it is that now, taken at such a terrible disadvantage, his arms firmly held by the men with whom he seemed to be taking a leisurely stroll, with a knife and a pistol pressing between his ribs on opposite sides as they passed up the street, he trembled violently and would have sunk a nerveless heap on the ground, had they not supported him.

Twice they passed men who would have attempted his rescue at a single call, but each time he felt those horrible weapons tickling his ribs, and as often did he suffer the bold foot-pads to lead him by in silence.

At the earliest possible point they turned aside from the main street, and passed through less frequented ones, not disdaining alleys and short cuts across vacant lots, but all the while Mr. Rolfe felt those dreaded weapons in contact with his ribs—and his heart—what there was left of it—played like an up-and-down pendulum in his throat. A misstep might easily be fatal—after all, was it not a stupendous practical joke on the part of some of his waggish friends?

Between these two extremes he fluctuated, but not daring to break the injunction placed upon him by saying a word, until his captors came to a halt in the rear of a stable standing not many rods in the rear of the building containing his business rooms.

"Slip your knife through his ribs if he makes a motion," hoarsely whispered the man with the revolver, for the first time releasing the banker's arm.

They stood in the deep shadow, but Rolfe could see that the speaker was removing his slouched hat and donning another covering. For a moment he was in doubt, but then the startling truth dawned upon him. This new disguise was the feathered semblance of a huge horned owl's head!

He knew then that he had fallen into the gripe of those terrible desperadoes, the Owls, and he knew that more than his life was in danger.

"Easy, Mr. Rolfe!" warningly muttered the owl's head, relieving his comrade. "We mean business, but your life is safe enough as long as you are sensible. Cut up rusty, and we'll leave you in prime condition for a funeral sermon—mind that!"

Shivering, trembling, the wretched prisoner watched the transformation of the man with the knife into the head of an owl, feeling vaguely that he had ere this seen that clear cut profile, momentarily exposed to his view. If so, his brain was too confused to identify the face at that moment.

Smoothing down his feathered head-dress, the man with the knife addressed the banker.

"Mr. Rolfe, you now know who we are, and can give a pretty good guess as to what we mean to do. You have made a good deal of money since you came here, and we have had our eyes on you for some time. You are fairly ripe, now, and we mean to squeeze you pretty dry. But it is only the filthy lucre we are after. We don't want your blood—but we'll take some of that if we can't get around it."

Just as he felt that the profile of the man with the knife was not entirely strange to him, so Edward P. Rolfe felt now that he had heard that smooth, clear voice before. When or where, he could not now recall.

"In plain words, we mean to rob the bank. If the alarm should be given before we are fairly away with the plunder, I swear that I will cut your heart out before I try to escape. I impress that upon your mind; your life depends on our success."

He paused for a moment as if to allow the fear-stricken banker time sufficient to fully comprehend his warning.

"Now then, is there any one sleeping in the bank? Is young Albus Black acting as night watchman, or does he remain there simply as a lodger?"

"If you lie," cautioned the man with the revolver, "it may cost you your life."

"He sleeps there," Rolfe managed to stammer.

"You and he each carry a key. Can you enter without alarming him, do you think? Mind, we are bound to go in, and if he wakes up, the chances are that both of you will get rubbed out. Now answer."

"He is a sound sleeper. He may—I hope he will—won't wake up," gasped the banker, scarce knowing what he did say.

"So much the worse for you and him both if he does."

An already prepared gag was slipped into Rolfe's mouth and firmly secured in place. His pockets were searched, and the bank key found among others. Then, guarding their captive as before, the Owls crossed over to the bank they contemplated "opening"—a neat looking frame building, a story and a half high.

A keen glance around showed that the coast was clear, and the door was quickly unlocked. No sound came from within as the door swung open and the three men entered.

The door was closed, the tallest robber locking it from the inside and removing the key. He then produced a dark lantern and opened the slide, casting a clear ray of light around the room, revealing every item and feature in turn, while they themselves remained in the obscurity.

The arrangements were those of any ordinary country bank. A walnut counter, bearing a wire screen along its length save one square aperture through which business was transacted. An open passage ran along one side of the room, leading to the private office in the rear. In this second room, Albus Black, the one clerk and assistant kept by Rolfe, slept on a lounge.

"He must be cared for," muttered the man with the revolver. "The light or the noise might awaken him, and he is no coward like his master."

"You can manage both the light and him; I'll settle the boy. If he should wake up, throw the glare into his eyes and blind him. Steady, now."

Coolly as he spoke, the Owl moved lightly along the passage, his comrade in crime bringing up the rear, forcing the banker along and sending the light in advance until it fell fairly upon the face of the sleeping youth.

Sound slumberer he may have been, but the bright glare awakened him now, and an exclamation of surprise burst from his lips as he half arose—only to fall back again with a hollow groan as the man with the knife leaped forward and brought the butt of a heavy revolver down on his head with fearful force.

No need of a second blow. Blood streamed from the wound and saturated the pillow on which the poor head lay.

Edward Rolfe almost fainted at the terrible sight, and was only kept from falling by the strong gripe on his neck. What little courage he may have possessed was utterly extinguished by this ruthless deed.

"He brought it on himself!" muttered the murderer, as if trying to excuse the bloody deed. "A moment more and he would have raised the alarm."

"You're sure he's settled?" coldly asked the second Owl.

"Ready for a funeral," with a hard laugh. "Just as you will be, old man, if you give us any trouble. Take warning by his fate, and do just as you are bidden, or I'll kill you with as little hesitation as I did him!"

Passing around the end of the counter, they stood before a large iron safe—"fire and burglar proof," its makers claimed, but probably they never anticipated its being attacked after the present fashion.

"You know what to do—do it," sternly ordered the Owl, pointing at the little silver-plated knob containing the secret of the "combination."

The banker never even thought of resisting, though the huge safe contained the fortunes of a dozen better men than himself. Unlike the heroic Martin, or noble Heywood, both of whom deliberately chose death rather than betray their trust under similar circumstances, Rolfe knelt before the safe and with trembling fingers turned the wheel as he spelled out the word forming the combination.

Eagerly the taller owl grasped the knob, but the massive door refused to open. A fierce curse escaped him.

"Try it again. If you fail this time, I'll scatter your brains all over the floor!" he snarled, angrily.

The very extremity of his danger served to compose Rolfe's nerves, and this time he made no mistake. The door was opened, the inner door unlocked, laying bare the treasure the Owls had stained their hands in human blood to win.

Quickly the safe was ransacked, the gold coin and bank notes being thrust into a stout bag.

"Now for the vault, old fellow," laughed the taller Owl. "We haven't found one-half what we need here. Mate, you look out and call the boys. There's enough gold and silver bricks in yonder to load them all. Here's the key."

The Owl obeyed, opening the door and uttering a low, guarded hoot which was speedily answered by the appearance of half a dozen men, all of whom wore the feathered head-dress beneath their slouched hats.

The vault was opened and the bullion packed for transportation. Not a dollar's worth of gold or silver was overlooked.

Bearing their heavy burden the six Owls departed, leaving the banker alone with the other two.

Then a strange thing happened.

By some means the feathered mask dropped from the head of the taller Owl—he whose hands had felled poor Albus Black—and fell to the floor. A sharp cry came from the unmasked man's lips, and as if to learn the cause, the other robber turned the light of the lantern full upon him. Only for an instant, then, realizing the danger of recognition, the light was averted.

Swiftly the assassin replaced his mask, then turned fiercely upon Edward Rolfe.

"Did you see my face?—curse you! if I thought so!"

"I don't think he did, mate," answered the other Owl. "The light was only on you for a moment, and his head was turned the other way. Even if he had, what matter?"

A fiendish laugh was the response to this question, and the blood of the banker grew more chill as he heard it.

"True, I reckon he'll never tell tales of this night's doings. Such a craven-hearted cur hadn't ought to live, anyway. Set down the light and twist his arms behind him."

There was a horrible meaning in the speaker's tones rather than words, and Edward Rolfe, believing his death was resolved upon, made a desperate attempt to escape. But he was like a child in the hands of those two powerful men, and was quickly thrown down and held helpless by one, while the other bound him hand and foot.

"Fetch him, along, mate," laughed the taller Owl, arising. "Put him on the lounge with the other dead man. They were friends in life—in death they shall not be divided!"

His words were obeyed. Dead and living lay side by side upon the narrow, blood-stained couch.

"Go bring in the kindlings, mate," continued the murderer. "Let's get the job over as soon as we can. The boys have got safe out of town with the plunder by this time."

In silence he was obeyed. The shorter outlaw brought in two great armfuls of pine knots and placed them in several piles where they would soonest communicate their flames to the woodwork. Over all was poured a quantity of turpentine, and then the subordinate Owl went outside to make sure that the coast was clear.

"As soon as you hear the hoot of an owl, old man, the fun begins," malignantly laughed the Owl. "In ten minutes later you will get a fine foretaste of what awaits you hereafter—ha!" as a low, lugubrious hoot came to their ears. "That's your death-note, old fellow!"

Lighting a roll of paper, the robber quickly set fire to the different piles, the red flames springing up as if by magic. Then he hastily left the house, closing the door after him.

And higher leaped the flames, shooting out their snake-like tongues toward the living and the dead!

CHAPTER XVI.

A SHOT 'TWIXT WIND AND WATER.

A most horrible situation!

Bound hand and foot, his tongue fettered as well, lying beside a dead or dying man, his head upon the same pillow, his cheek in the clammy, coagulating blood, his eyes alone possessing any power over themselves, and these enchained by the leaping, dancing, growing flames.

Truly Edward P. Rolfe was "making a night of it," but in a far different manner from that so fondly anticipated.

Desperately he struggled to free his hands, his feet, his jaws—if he could only slip the gag, his screams for help would soon bring aid to the spot—but in vain. Experienced hands had done the work, and his furious efforts were all in vain, though he rolled heavily to the floor while striving to release himself. But that only carried him still nearer those terrible tongues of fire.

It seemed hours to him—ages of bitter fear and torture such as might well turn one's hair from black to white—but really only a very few minutes passed after the disappearance of the Owl assassin before a wild, thrilling shout rent the night air without.

"Fire! fire! Rolfe's bank is on fire!"

Sweeter than the most heavenly music came these words to the ears of the helpless wretch within, and more desperately than ever did he strive to recover the use of his tongue, for even yet the aid might come too late to save him, unless it was prompt and rightly directed.

The floor and the counter were now ablaze. The red, serpent-like tongues of flame were shooting nearer and nearer the spot where he lay. Already his hair, his clothes were beginning to crisp and scorch. Five minutes' delay might easily prove fatal.

Again that shrill cry rung out upon the night air, to be caught up and repeated by another and another voice until the whole valley rung with the thrilling sounds.

Men act promptly on such a signal in places where steam or even hand fire-engines are unknown. There are no listless spectators standing with hands in pockets, watching the heroic labors of those who are paid to fight the flames. Each being works as though fighting for his own, and coward or laggard would fare ill at their hands.

Only pausing to make sure that his alarm had been heard by other ears, the man who discovered the fire, grasped a heavy fragment of rock, and hurled it against the door with all his force.

Only the one assault was needed. The door swung open, cracked and splintered. Smoke poured forth, and a tongue of flame darted out

almost into the face of the miner, driving him back half blinded. But only for a moment.

A shrill, unearthly scream came from within—followed by a wild, maniacal laugh!

"Somebody's in thar, roastin' alive!" gasped the man who had driven in the door, as two men dashed up to the spot.

"Guard your face and let's rush in! Quick—or we'll be too late!" cried one of the newcomers.

Pulling his hat over his eyes and bowing his head he made a dash at the opening, only to be driven back and almost overthrown by a wild, spectral shape that seemed vomited forth by the flame-tinged smoke—a shape wrapped in fire, with pale, blood-streaked face, and staring eyes from whence reason had fled forever!

Once more that horrible laugh—unearthly, blood-curdling! Then the figure fell lifeless to the ground.

"God above!" gasped the man who had raised the alarm. "It's young Black—that's bin foul play—he's bin murdered!" he gasped as with his bare hands he tore away the burning remnants of the night-clothes worn by the unfortunate clerk.

A crowd was around him now, but the two men who had first answered his alarm were not among them.

One glance at the flame-wreathed form, then they bowed their heads and plunged into the burning building, guided by the sounds which came from the helpless banker, whose feet were kept lustily thumping the floor. Together they grasped him, and then beat a hasty retreat from the doomed building.

A terrible cry went up from the excited crowd as they saw and recognized the banker. Bound hand and foot, securely gagged, left in the building to die a horrible death! Heaven pity the devilish criminal or criminals if ever discovered, for these men would never show them mercy!

"Who did it?—give us a clew!" uttered a voice in the ear of the nearly dead banker—a voice that caused him to shudder and his blood to run cold in his veins, for it was a counterpart of the voice he had last heard when left helpless on that bloody couch!

And there, bending over him, pale and stern, was the face of the speaker—the same face he had seen by the flash of the dark-lantern when the dropping of the owl's head mask drew that cry of annoyance from the lips of the robber who had stricken down young Albus Black!

The handsome face danced strangely—then was swallowed up by darkness as the senses of the banker yielded. He swooned, and lay upon the ground like a dead man.

"Carry them to the Parker House, some of you. The rest pitch in and fight the fire—come on!" cried the voice that had so terribly startled Rolfe, and its owner was the most active of all in fighting the flames.

There were no laggards. Nearly every man doing business in Golconda had a direct interest in the banking-house, and they fought the flames as only men can fight who believe their worldly all is at stake. But their efforts were all in vain, so far as the bank building was concerned. The flames had gained too great headway before being discovered, and in an hour more the spot was marked only by a heap of glowing embers.

Both Rolfe and his clerk were conveyed to the hotel, where their injuries were carefully attended to. The banker was in no danger, a few burns being the extent of his injuries, but the doctors looked very grave when they saw the clerk.

His skull was crushed in by that terrible blow. If he lived through the night, it would be little less than a miracle; certainly he could not survive another day.

Edward Rolfe, on recovering his senses, kept his lips tightly closed, and would answer no questions put to him, until Sam Ellis was found and brought to his bedside. Then he ordered the room cleared of all save the city marshal.

For nearly an hour they were closeted together, and when Ellis came forth his face was pale and there was an expression of bewildered pain in his eyes.

Scarcely had he left the hotel, when a blackened, scorched figure entered, and asked to be shown the banker's room.

"He refuses to see any one, Mr. Brown," said the landlord.

"That does not include me," quietly replied the famous detective, now no longer in disguise. "I must see him in the interests of justice. There has been murder and robbery done here to-night, and he may possess a clew to the criminals. Show me up to his room."

The landlord dared not refuse. Dan Brown was a power in the land, and the golden star which he displayed was a passport before which all bars must fall.

"You can go now," said the detective, pausing before the door of the banker's room. "You will know the result as soon as anybody else, but in such a case as this, we must be very guarded."

Mr. Winkle departed, and then Dan Brown entered the room, closing the door softly behind him.

There was a wild look in Rolfe's eyes as he recognized his visitor, and one hand slipped swiftly beneath the pillow.

"There is no cause for alarm, Mr. Rolfe," quietly said the detective, reading this action aright. "As an officer of justice, I have called to learn the truth of this black night's work. Have you any clew to the perpetrators of this outrage?"

The banker moistened his parched lips with his tongue, and a strange light crept into his bloodshot eyes as they drooped before the steady gaze of the detective. But his hand was not removed from the revolver which lay beneath his pillow.

"Time is of great importance in such a case as this, Mr. Rolfe," added Dan Brown, as the banker made no response. "A great crime has been committed. If you possess any clew to the perpetrators, you owe it to yourself as well as all those who have had business dealings with you, to speak out plainly and at once."

"Am I right in concluding that the bank was robbed?"

"Yes—they made a clean sweep—both safe and vault," slowly responded the banker.

"Who and what were they? How many? Tell me the whole story. I do not ask through simple curiosity, Mr. Rolfe, but as an officer of the law. You have no right to keep back a single point—nor will you, if you really wish to bring the criminals to justice."

"If!" ejaculated the banker, and there was a burning light in his eyes as they met those of the detective. "They murdered Albus Black—they robbed me and all my customers—they bound and gagged me, leaving me to roast to death! Yet you say if I wish to bring them to justice!"

"Blame yourself for the doubt, not me," coolly uttered the detective. "But it is a doubt you may hear expressed by more than one pair of lips when it becomes known that you are giving the criminals time to escape by refusing to state the whole facts of the case."

"You mean that I will be accused of playing a part—that men will think I am a sharer in this robbery?"

"Unless you bestir yourself, yes."

The banker laughed, low and bitterly.

"If they escape, my personal loss will be over fifty thousand dollars, not counting that for which I am responsible, the amounts placed in my keeping by depositors—"

"So much the more reason why you should lose no time in setting the machinery of the law at work," quietly interrupted Dan Brown. "Ha! Ellis, I am glad you came," he cried, as the door opened and the city marshal entered the room. "Perhaps Mr. Rolfe will have more faith in you. He hesitates strangely about giving me an account of this little affair."

Samuel Ellis appeared seriously embarrassed, but the banker came quickly to the rescue.

"I was not satisfied that you had the right to ask, but I will tell you the whole story now—you and Mr. Ellis."

With feverish rapidity, but clearly enough, the banker detailed his adventures of that memorable night, forgetting nothing of importance, but the story need not be reproduced here.

"It was the man who struck poor Black," he said, coming to the point where the feathered mask dropped from the face of the taller robber. "He uttered a cry as it fell, and not knowing what was the matter, the other rascal turned the light of his lantern full upon the face of his comrade."

"You were looking—you saw his face?" asked Brown.

"As plainly as I see your face at this moment!"

"You can swear to it if ever you see that face again?"

"Yes—and more—I have sworn to it!" cried Rolfe, exultingly. "Mr. Ellis at this moment holds the warrant for the arrest of the robber and assassin!"

"Why did you hesitate about telling me this before?"

"Because I was resolved the ends of justice should not be defeated—because I have sworn by all that I hold sacred to bring the foul assassin to the hangman's rope!"

Fiercely the banker uttered these words. Swiftly his hand came forth from under the pillow, clasp a cocked revolver, the muzzle of which stared Dan Brown full in the face!

Coldly the detective gazed at him for a moment, then his lip curled contemptuously as he turned toward the marshal.

"Has the fellow gone crazy, Ellis?"

Before the man addressed could speak, Rolfe cried:

"The face I saw—the face I swore to—was that of Dan Brown, the great Denver detective! Ellis, arrest him! And you—lift a finger or try to draw a weapon, and I will blow your brains out!"

The detective did not even glance toward the furious banker, but gazed steadily into the face of the marshal.

"Tell me what this means, Ellis," he demanded. "Is that fool drunk or crazy that he dares accuse me of this crime?"

"I believe he must be mistaken," was the slow reply. "But he swears to what he told you just now; that he saw your face when that mask fell off."

"And you have a warrant for my arrest, on this charge?"

"Yes. I believe you can explain it all away, but I could do nothing else. You must go with me until the dirty mistake can be cleared up, old fellow."

"Arrest him—put handcuffs on him, or he'll escape—"

"Dry up—I'm running this thing now," blurted Ellis. "Give me your word not to make any trouble, Brown, and no one shall know that you are under arrest."

Dan Brown hesitated, but only for a moment. "I promise, and thank you for your consideration, old fellow. Get me out of here as quietly as possible. Let my poor wife have one more peaceful night."

"Thousands of them, I hope," cheerily answered the big-hearted marshal. "Of course it is all a mistake. I'd sooner believe myself guilty! I know you couldn't do it!"

Dan Brown made no reply to this impulsive speech, though he felt it keenly, and together they left the room.

The office was thronged by excited men, who crowded around the twain with eager questions, but Ellis bluntly declared that he could tell them nothing more than they knew already, and shaking them off, reached the street.

"To the stone 'jug,' of course!" half-inquired Dan Brown.

"Yes," answered Ellis, his face flushing. "It is the safest place. Not," he added, hastily, "that I fear you will try to escape, but the people are terribly worked up about this affair, and if they learn that you are arrested, I'm afraid there'll be serious trouble. A mob is the devil and all to control when it once gets started."

"You can't keep the secret long. Some one will scent it out."

"Long enough for me to collect the witnesses who can swear that you were somewhere else when the robbery and murder took place. Then old Rolfe can't help withdrawing his charge, and we two will take the field and never let up until we have run the real criminals to earth!"

Dan Brown made no response to this warm speech, and no more was said until the jail, a small but stout stone structure was reached. As it was empty, there was no one on duty, and the marshal carried the key.

"It's not quite as comfortable as the Parker House," said the marshal, as they entered the gloomy building. "One comfort: you won't have to board here long."

"That depends on the mob," said Dan Brown, quietly.

"I'll have you out of here before anybody knows of this ridiculous charge. Of course you can prove an alibi."

"Of course I can't," was the startling response. "Rolfe swears I was the principal robber—swears that he saw my face and recognized me. Against his oath, I can only advance my unsupported word that I was not there."

The marshal's face turned pale beneath the dim rays of the lantern. Dan Brown laughed softly as he noted the consternation of his friend.

"It looks ugly, don't it, old fellow? I set off alone this afternoon, believing I had found a clue to the retreat of the Owls. I followed it until after dark, then lost it. I turned toward town, and was on the North Hill when I saw the light, and heard the alarm of fire. Of course I hastened at once to the spot, arriving just as they carried old Rolfe out of the blazing building."

"And there is nobody who can swear to the truth of this—none who met you away from town?" asked Ellis.

"Not a living soul," quietly responded the detective.

"The good Lord help you, then, for man can't do it!" exclaimed the marshal in a solemn tone.

CHAPTER XVII. A FRENZIED MOB.

THERE was very little sleeping done in Golconda that night. The whole town was in an uproar. All was excitement. Each man, woman and child, felt him or herself one of those injured by that atrocious crime—as in fact nearly all of them would be, unless the criminals shall be discovered and the stolen treasure recovered.

A few of the more practical and energetic turned out under the direction of Sam Ellis and scoured the hills in various directions, hoping to stumble upon the robbers, faint though the chances were. But by far the majority thronged the numerous saloons, going out between drinks to view the still glowing ruins, or else to call at the Parker House for the latest information concerning young Black.

The clerk had been well liked in town among the better class of people. He was too quiet and sober to be an extraordinary favorite among the roistering class, but even those respected him.

"A fine lad, bold enough to do what he thought right," said one big, hairy-faced miner among the crowd that thronged the Dew Drop Inn. "He didn't drink, nor smoke, nor cuss an' fight like we tough roosters, but it wasn't 'cause the sand was lackin'. When he came out here, his mother—a poor lone widdy woman, gents, she made him promise not to, an' he never hain't!"

"Wuss then all," broke in another fellow, the last man in the crowd a stranger would have picked out as owning such a soft and sentimental heart. "Thar's the pore gal as he was to hev married—the day set, an' all ready. She's over thar now aside him, an' takin' on most turrible! They do think her little heart's clean bu'sted wide open, an' that the same hole in the ground 'll hold all two both on 'em!"

Rough though this speech was, it touched a powerful chord in the hearts of those present. Deep and bitter curses were showered upon the foul assassins. The mob was slowly but surely growing ripe for an outbreak—would they find the victim?

Spontaneous as this all seemed, there were hidden hands at work, cunningly manipulating the wires. Not only at the Dew Drop, but at each saloon or place where the excited citizens collected, there the same arts were brought into requisition though the master workmen kept carefully in the background. Those who talked the most bitterly were quite as free with their money as with their tongues, and those who drank repeatedly at their expense quite naturally accepted their leadership.

Thus several hours were spent, the evil passions rising higher and higher, only lacking a word to give them direction—a word that was quickly to come.

A wild yell arose just without the densely crowded Dew Drop Inn, and then the tall form of King Carmichael was seen forcing his way toward the bar. Close behind him came the huge, gorilla-like negro porter of the Parker House, his ugly countenance bearing an expression at once proud and frightened.

"Make way, there!" shouted Carmichael. "I can tell you who murdered poor Black! This dark—"

"Kill him—lynch him—roast the cuss alive!" yelled a dozen furious voices, and as many eager hands were outstretched to grasp the now terrified negro.

"Twain't me, gemmen—don't kill a pore nigger!"

"Easy, gentlemen!" cried Carmichael, knocking aside the nearest hands. "The nigger didn't do it—he brings us word who did, though!"

"Whooray for the dark! H'ist him up on the bar so we all kin see an' hear him!" yelled the rough-looking fellow who had waxed pathetic over the grief of the betrothed bride of Albus Black.

With a friendly force that left him well-nigh naked as he came into the world, and fairly drove the breath from his body, Jaybird-heel was hoisted upon the counter, looking down upon a mass of terribly excited faces.

"Give him a fair chance, gents!" cried Carmichael. "You'll frighten him clean out o' his seventeen senses. Silence! Speak up, blackie. Tell the truth and you shall not be hurt. Spit it out!"

The negro could not so readily recover from either his affright or his rough handling, and his speech was both rambling and obscure—too much so to be recorded here at length.

Enough that, his curiosity aroused, he had contrived to overhear all that transpired in the room where the banker lay. He repeated the accusation made to Sam Ellis; told how the banker obliged him to swear out a warrant; told how Dan Brown of Denver came in and of the strange interview which followed. And then, to cap the climax, for the first time he mentioned who was the accused.

"Marse Rolfe swore dat de face he see'd in dar—de face of de man dat knocked lilly marse Black on de head—he swore dat it 'longed to marse Dan Brown ob Denver!"

A blank silence followed this astounding assertion. The crowd stared at each other in mute amazement. Not one present but knew the famous detective by reputation, and they could scarcely believe their ears.

Then a single voice arose:

"It can't be—not Dan Brown o' Denver! The nigger hes made a bloody blunder, sure!"

With a cat-like bound King Carmichael was upon the bar, standing beside the negro spy.

"I answer for the nigger, gentlemen!" he cried, boldly. "Would he be fool enough to come here of his own accord and swear to a lie, knowing that when we found out he had been playing roots on us we would be mighty apt to make it red-hot for him? Not much!"

"Who is this Dan Brown of Denver as he calls himself? A detective, who has done the State some service. I give him credit for that. But does it give him the right to commit robbery and murder? Is he the first detective on record who has played a double game? The old saw says, 'set a thief to catch a thief.' There may be some exceptions—all detectives are not rascals at heart, or secretly leagued

with the very criminals they pretend to be hunting down. There have been a few white crows found, I believe, though I'd hate to go hungry until I found one—but if asked to make the discovery of either an albino crow or an honest detective I'd toss up to decide which one I'd best go gunning for."

"We don't know much about Dan Brown of Denver, outside of what common rumor says, but we all of us know Edward P. Rolfe. A gentleman, honest, truthful and on the square. He would never swear to a lie. He does swear that the man who butchered Albus Black was afterward unmasked by an accident. He swears that his mate turned the light fair on his face—and that that face was the face of Dan Brown! So positive was he that he swore out a warrant against the detective, and Sam Ellis made the arrest."

"He'll git his just deserts ef Sam is runnin' the machine," cried an ardent admirer of the city marshal.

"A squarer man was never made; I frankly admit that. But what can Sam do? Only produce his prisoner when called for—the rest lies with the judge, the lawyers and mutton-headed jury. Does any man here for a single moment believe that Dan Brown will be convicted, even though the evidence was ten times as direct? If so, he is a fool! It would be considered a personal disgrace to each officer of justice. He would be decided insane, or else his fellow-scavengers would swear to an alibi."

"One of these two things would be done, if Dan Brown of Denver ever be brought into court on this charge. I say if. And I will add—if he does go to trial, then we one and all are his accomplices in this foul murder—for he will surely go scot free through favoritism."

"Gentlemen, the assassin is in the jail yonder. What shall be done with him?"

"Take him out an' hang him! Lynch the durned 'assin!"

A single voice broke the silence, but it was enough. Just as a spark will explode a mighty magazine, so one word can set a mob in motion. And when once started, a mob of such men as these hardy miners is like an avalanche—quite as hard to check.

"Spread the news!" shouted Carmichael, leaping down from the counter. "Tell all the boys so none will be cheated out of a share. Down with the murderer!"

Again the moonlighted streets of Golconda rung with shouts and yells, but far more terrible and awe-inspiring than the tumult which reigned earlier in the night, for that arose from a laudable desire to save—now to destroy! It was the cry for human blood!

The two good men whom Sam Ellis left to guard the stone jail, heard the wild outcry, and read its meaning aright. They were brave men, equal to any ordinary crisis, but they were married men with wives and children dependent upon them. They knew that this was no ordinary mob. The mighty volume of united yells told them that. They might die at their post, slaying a few out of the scores, should they elect to defend their prisoner, but die they would, and that without serving him in the least. Just the contrary. If blood was shed, Dan Brown would be held accountable for it all.

They interchanged one glance, and read each other's hearts. Then they did what ninety-nine men out of every hundred would have done—they stole away under the shadows, leaving the stone jail unguarded.

Inside, Dan Brown also heard that terrible outcry, and knew what it foreboded. But he did not even arise from his rude cot. Unarmed, he could do nothing. And he was too much of a man to make a useless outcry.

The frenzied mob came on, bearing sledges and crow-bars with which to batter down the stout doors. At their head was King Carmichael, supported by Paul Gerux.

A few fierce blows, then the barrier gave way, and the mob swarmed into the jail, yelling, cursing, each one striving to be the first to fasten upon the prisoner.

Pale but composed, his handsome face like marble beneath the red light of the lanterns borne by his foes, Dan Brown of Denver confronted them with folded arms.

Not a word did he utter. He knew that he was doomed. Mercy could not be expected from such animals—human they were not then—nor would he demean himself to ask it.

Rudely he was fastened upon, and dragged outside. A noosed rope was flung over his head. The mob shouted and howled as only such a crowd can, wildly delighted at the shameful sight. Each man was eager to grasp the rope.

"Cool and easy, gentlemen!" shouted King Carmichael, swiftly throwing off the noose. "We are avengers, not murderers. He shall hang, but it must be in ship-shape style."

It was from no merciful motive the villain spoke and acted thus, but from an excess of cruelty and hatred. He knew that the eager hands, in fighting for the rope, would quickly drag the prisoner to death under their trampling feet. Such a death would be too speedy. The man he hated should suffer ten-fold, in noting

the gradual approach of death—and then die like the blackest felon of all!

Better for him, perhaps, had his cruelty been less refined.

At that moment a muscular form pressed through the crowd, and with two swift blows, knocked Carmichael and Gerux headlong to the ground, setting their prisoner at liberty!

"Back into the jail!" he cried, pushing Dan Brown into the building, then facing the amazed mob with a revolver in each hand, cocked and ready for use.

"Two hundred onto one man ain't fair play, gents," he said, cool as an iceberg to all outward appearance. "S'pose we make the game a little mo' even?"

"Kill the infernal scoundrel!" spluttered Carmichael, as he scrambled dizzily to his feet after that terrible blow.

"It can't be did quick enough to save you, stranger, fer at the fast move I'll make you cold meat. An' what Enoch Dodge says, he gen'rally backs up."

Just then another diversion came. A strong horse was urged with bloody spur through the crowd, knocking over those barring the way and scattering them like nine-pins. Then the bold rider leaped to the ground and stood shoulder to shoulder with the bold ex-marshal of Grenada.

It was Sam Ellis, and his hands clasped a brace of revolvers.

"Fall back, you cowardly curs!" he thundered, his big blue eyes aglow with a dangerous light. "Dan Brown is my prisoner, and before you take him from me, you've got to kill me. Back, or I'll open fire—and shoot to kill!"

"Twenty-fo' bullets an' plenty o' cold steel to fall back on!" laughed Enoch Dodge, recklessly. "Sail in, gents, whenever you git a good ready. We'll try hard to git one good bite while you're gittin' a squar' meal!"

Light as a cat, Dan Brown slipped past his bold defenders and leaped upon the still unsteady Gerux, who stood nearest the jail. Flinging him to the ground, he tore the leather belt from around his waist, then leaped back almost before his action was noted, much less understood by the mob.

"Just to make it a little more interesting, gentlemen," he cried, with a careless laugh, as he faced the mob, cocking the pistols so dexterously obtained. "I consider myself Mr. Ellis's prisoner, and at his command will lay down my weapons. If you want them, come and take them!"

"You must murder me first! We live or die together!"

A woman's voice—a woman's lithe form—but braver, truer heart never faced deadly peril.

Revolver in hand, Rachel Brown stood beside her husband.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LAW AND ORDER PREVAILS.

ONE surprise followed another in rapid procession that night, all startling enough, but this capped the climax.

Like magic the detective's wife made her appearance by his side. No one noticed or heard her approach. Not until these brave words rung out—not until she confronted them in her glorious beauty, her eyes flashing indignant fire, her long hair streaming loosely down her back, her white hands adding two more revolvers to that already formidable battery—not until then was her coming even suspected.

Yet her dramatic appearance is easily explained.

Her slumbers were broken by that wild tumult, and as the frenzied mob rushed past the Parker House, she caught enough to show her that her husband was in deadly danger. Hardly stopping to slip on a dress and slippers, Rachel Brown armed herself and hastened forth, to save her loved one or else die with him.

Sam Ellis was a keen judge of human nature, and saw that now or never was his chance.

Nowhere will you find more true chivalry—where fair woman is concerned—than among the rough, tough and hardy fellows who throng the mining country. Almost always a petticoat is a passport with them, even when worn by those sad blots on the fame of the sex, "Calamity Jane," "Fighting Fanny," et al. How much greater the influence, then, of this true lady, gloriously beautiful in face and figure, who declared that they could only carry out their mad vengeance by first slaying her.

"Gentlemen!" cried Sam Ellis, his tones clear and firm yet conciliatory, "I beg of you all to reflect on what you are about to do. Because one foul murder has been committed, is that any reason why you should stain your hands by another, even more cowardly?"

"Blood for blood!" cried a deep voice from the crowd. "Dan Brown murdered Albus Black!"

"A coward uttered those words!" screamed Enoch Dodge. "Pint him out, gents, or shove him for'ard so I kin git a squint at the critter. Whoever 'cuses my old pard o' murderin' even a bedbug or a 'skeeter is a liar an' a boss-thief, an' I kin lick him clean out o' his boots!"

"What Enoch Dodge—the honorable mayor of Grenada, gentlemen—says is true. Dan

Brown never struck Albus Black—he was not in town at the time. We have positive proof that he is innocent, and by hanging him, you would have been guilty of foul murder!"

"Ed Rolfe swears that Dan Brown struck the blow that will or has murdered Albus Black!"

"And he believes the truth of the oath he took, no doubt, but when he learns all, he will be the first man to apologize to Mr. Brown for the terrible wrong he has done him. You all know me, gentlemen. Have I ever lied to you?"

A moment's silence, then an honest murmur bore evidence to the popularity of the city marshal. He knew that his point was almost won, and made a bold stroke.

"I know who the criminals are. They are at this moment within hearing of my voice!"

"Name—name! Pint 'em out!" yelled the crowd.

"For you to lynch?" laughed the marshal. "No, no, gentlemen—I'm a lover of law and order, and then the capture of these rascals will be a big feather in my cap. You see I am frank. My plans are so carefully laid that I have no fear the scoundrels will escape. They are watched, and at the first attempt to flee, they will be arrested."

"Bah! he's giving us taffy, boys! Prove your words, Sam Ellis, by pointing out the birds you say you have spotted."

"Go slow, King Carmichael," cried the marshal, meaningly. "I don't mean the murderers shall be lynched. They shall suffer, but only after a regular trial. But I will give the honest portion of you a little hint."

"The Owls committed this crime, gentlemen, and then, to cover their tracks as well as to dispose of a bitter enemy to all such scoundrels, they raised this cry against Dan Brown of Denver. Those very assassins were the loudest in crying for his blood. Watch them one and all—do not suffer one of them to leave town—and you will see that I have spoken no more than the truth."

"And so give you a chance to run the real murderer out of danger!" cried a deep voice from the shadows beyond.

"If by that is meant Dan Brown of Denver, he is still my prisoner, and I pledge you my word that he shall remain in custody until this affair is entirely cleared up. Mr. Brown, hand me your weapons."

"Willingly," said the detective, surrendering his pistols. "I did not arm against justice, only injustice."

A ringing cheer from the honest majority greeted this action, and all present knew that the victory was won, thanks to true hearts and ready hands.

"One word more, gentlemen, and then I hope you will quietly disperse," added the city marshal, frankly. "If I spoke plainly and acted roughly, it was in the performance of my simple duty. Bear that in mind, and don't hold a grudge—but if you do, spit it out, and I'll be happy to apologize with my tongue or my hands, just as the occasion demands."

"Even divvy, mate!" cried Enoch Dodge. "You do the tongue work an' turn the other over to me. I ain't on duty, jest now, an' kin stop a bullet or dull the knife with my karkidge jest as well's not."

This bold speech was received with hearty laughter, and, a mob no longer, the crowd slowly dispersed, only half a dozen men remaining whose names were called out by Marshal Ellis.

These were stationed as a guard before the shattered door, while Ellis and Enoch Dodge joined Dan Brown and his wife, they having retreated inside after the detective voluntarily disarmed himself.

Rachel caught the honest marshal's hand and impulsively pressed it to her lips.

"For my dear husband's life—you saved him from being murdered!" she uttered, her voice choking with strong emotion.

"I did less than our good friend, here," clapping a hand on Enoch Dodge's shoulder. "His was the entering wedge, and I only followed it up. But we could have accomplished little had not you put in an appearance. The boys are used to facing pistols in the hands of men, but when a beautiful woman stands behind the barkers, the case is different. I knew then that we had got 'em!" laughed Ellis.

"But it was you that discovered the real criminals—"

Rachel faltered, her face growing pale as death. Sam Ellis quickly averted his head, but not in time to keep from her eyes the sober look that chased away the smile. As by instinct she read the truth.

Dan Brown passed his arm around her waist and gently drew her down beside him on the cot.

"You know that I am innocent, wife, and must have faith that all will come out right in the end, even if the guilty ones have escaped for the present."

"Course it will—bound to!" exclaimed Enoch Dodge. "Nobody but a durned, double an' twisted fool'd even dream o' Dan Brown's playin' dirt onto anybody—an' then don't Sam

Ellis say he's got the p'izen critters marked down? An' I kin lick any 'coon as says Sam Ellis lies—"

"Begin with me, then, old friend," interposed the marshal, with a sickly laugh. "I did lie—but I knew that there was no hope of getting clear of that crowd without a fight—and the first shot fired or blow struck would have signed our death warrants—unless I could convince them that Mr. Brown was innocent. I feel sure that the real criminals were among the mob, but who they are, I have no more idea than the man in the moon!"

"A lie like that ain't no lie at all. But now tell me the hull a'fair. Who's bin killed, an' why, an' how did my old mate git mixed up into the scrape?"

"Still in ignorance—and yet you risked your life in my defense, not knowing but what I was as guilty—"

"Easy, mate!" interrupted the worthy mayor of Grenada, as the detective impulsively spoke. "I ain't no fool, ef I do say it myself. I've knowed you sence long afore the pin-feathers begun to sprout onto your face—an' in all that time, I never once ketched you off o' the squar', never knowed you to play crooked, even when the keerds was stocked ag'inst you."

"I jest got in town this evenin'. I hearn the yelpin', an' knowed thar war fun afoot. Course I peeled out an' jined in. But when I hearn your name—when I saw they was goin' to lynch you—then I knowed thar was foul play somewhere, an' I tuck a hand in."

"And saved his life," broke in Sam Ellis. "I feared something of the kind, and as I met with no success out in the hills, I hastened back to town. I heard the uproar, and made my horse travel for all he was worth, but I would have been too late, only for your brave move."

"He was my mate," was the simple response, as though that fact comprised all.

A genuine heart of gold was—and is, I am glad to state—that worn in the bosom of rough old Enoch Dodge.

Dodge again asked for enlightenment, and was told the plain facts so far as those present knew them. He listened in silence, a deep, brooding frown wrinkling his brow.

"It's a put-up job—that's cl'ar enough," he commented. "I know old Rolfe; a queer enough critter in some ways, but one who wouldn't knowin'ly tell a lie or say anythin' to injure a innocent feller bein' fer untold gold. He b'lieves he see'd your face—"

"He did see it, I have no doubt," quietly interposed the detective, smiling faintly at the utter amazement of his two stout friends. "The face of my 'double,' so like mine in every respect that even my wife here was deceived."

In guarded tones, Dan Brown told them of the daring imposition which had been practiced upon his wife before she left Denver, adding thoughtfully:

"For some reason they are resolved to destroy me—why, it is useless to guess with the little light we have. The man who personated me at that masquerade, I firmly believe is the same scoundrel that robbed Rolfe and struck Albus Black that dastardly blow!"

"Not a doubt of it—plain as mud!" cried Dodge, but sobering down with a ludicrous rapidity. "The trouble 'll be to git them as don't know you like we do, to b'lieve it, though!"

"There are only two chances for me to get out of the toils, as I see," slowly added Dan Brown, "and both of those are terribly slender! One is to break down the testimony of Mr. Rolfe; the other is to discover the actual criminals—"

"If any man can do that, it is Sol Scott!" cried Rachel, speaking as by inspiration.

Sam Ellis shook his head doubtfully. Since that duel in the air, when Vernon Shadutz met a well-merited death, there had been many and strange rumors floating about, none of them wholly creditable to Sol Scott. Clear and open-hearted as the day, the marshal regarded all mystery as dangerous—and the tall miner was a perfect enigma.

Dan Brown said nothing, but a quick glance passed between him and his wife. Whether that look conveyed reproof or a caution, no more was said on that subject.

"We want to git to work, an' that without losin' no more time," at length observed Enoch Dodge. "The p'izen imps kin be found, an' we got to find 'em, too."

Rachel at first refused to be separated from her husband, clinging to his neck and for the first time that night giving evidence that she was a woman as well as a heroine, by weeping bitterly.

"The mob won't raise again, lady," said Ellis, confidently. "It's only the first minutes of such an outburst that is to be dreaded. As soon as they begin to listen to reason, the danger is over. Besides, there are good men on guard, and a single shot from them will bring enough more here to clean out a dozen mobs. I pledge you my word Mr. Brown is safe."

"And you can help me better outside than in, darling," whispered the detective, pressing his lips to hers.

Rachel raised no further objections, but left

the jail, being escorted back to the Parker House by Enoch Dodge.

Left alone, Dan Brown pondered long and earnestly over the black cloud that had so strangely enveloped him.

He felt sure that the robbery and murder which accompanied it, were but part of a diabolical scheme to ruin him. First, that cunning imposition on his wife—and his teeth grated savagely as he saw that the plot must also include her as a victim—then this seemingly accidental unmasking of a face startlingly like his.

But who could this unscrupulous "double" be?

In vain he strove to solve the mystery. There was not the faintest clew to act upon. All was mystery, black and unfathomable!

Wearied, both bodily and mentally, Dan Brown lay down upon his cot and slept long and peacefully.

Day dawned, waxed and waned, Dan Brown sat still pondering upon that terrible problem, but apparently no nearer the solution than before, when a sudden light flooded his mystified brain, and he cried aloud:

"Thunder! can it be that some one has got hold of that—"

He abruptly ceased, for a man hastily entered the cell. It was Sam Ellis, his face deeply clouded, his agitation strong.

"It's bitter black news I bring you, Brown!" he said, his voice unsteady. "Not the faintest clew have we been able to pick up, and now—Albus Black has died of that blow!"

CHAPTER XIX.

DAN BROWN'S "DOUBLE."

THOSE who had the best opportunities of knowing, hesitated not to declare that the "Senate" was by long odds the best restaurant in town, and that it would have done credit to a very much larger and more civilized city than Golconda. Its proprietors were gentlemen, its rates in proportion to its respectability, its larder contained all the delicacies of the season, while its supply of liquors and cigars comprised only the choicest and dearest brands. For these reasons, all combined, the patrons of the Senate were generally very select, and drunken rows never occurred within its precincts.

Few citizens of Golconda could afford to give a "wine supper" at the Senate, and fewer yet—if any—were those who would decline such a tempting invitation.

When last we saw Edward P. Rolfe, Esquire, he lay in bed, pretty badly used up, and seemingly the last person in all Golconda who would form one of a small party at the Senate—yet rather less than twenty-four hours after he was rescued from the flames that were consuming his bank building, he sat in a private room on the second floor of the restaurant, smoking a choice cigar and toying with a half emptied champagne glass!

Just before dark that day, City Marshal Ellis introduced Enoch Dodge, Mayor of Grenada, to the banker, as a particular friend of Dan Brown and himself. The mayor frankly admitted that he felt sure there must be some grave mistake in connecting Dan Brown of Denver with the lamentable affair, and proposed that they three meet that evening at the Senate and calmly discuss the matter over a good cigar and bottle of wine.

Mr. Rolfe was a confirmed *bon vivant*, and though he hesitated—for in the room adjoining his, even then he could hear the faint yet heart-rending sobs of the poor girl who bowed over the cold corpse of her murdered betrothed—he was unable to resist the temptation. The promise was given and kept.

The proprietors had been spoken to, and the room was reached by means of a private staircase, without entering the restaurant proper. Wine of the choicest brands and prime cigars were awaiting the trio, and the eyes of the worthy banker sparkled as he noted the labels. Surely the honorable mayor of Grenada was one of a thousand!

For some little time the unpleasant cause of their meeting was not alluded to, and Rolfe felt happy, even though he had so recently lost a fortune and almost his life.

But his brow clouded, and a grave light came into his eyes when Enoch Dodge finally broached the subject.

"We kin talk business an' enjoy our liquor at the same time," he said, soberly. "A good friend o' mine is in trouble, an' tellable though this bug-juice is, it tastes in my throat like castor-oil long as I know his life is in danger all through a pesky mistake!"

"There is no mistake so far as I am concerned, Mr. Dodge," coldly and firmly responded the banker, looking much as though the costly wine was beginning to disagree with him, too.

"Then you still believe that Dan Brown was one of those men?" asked Sam Ellis, gravely.

"I know it," warmly replied Rolfe. "Gentlemen, I claim to be an honest man. Last night's work, unless the spoils be recovered, which I hardly dare hope, has made me a poor man—a beggar, if I am held accountable for all

the bullion those rascals stole—but if I could recover every mill of that loss, by swearing falsely, I would cut out my tongue by the roots rather than yield to the temptation."

"I b'lieve you would," said Dodge, sincerely. "I never met you afore, but I've heard of you often enough, an' I know that you're a honest man, clean through. Neither Ellis—nor me meant any sling at you when we spoke of a mistake. We know you are honest in swarin' as you did. But in sech close quarters as them, human eyesight is monstrous deceivin'—"

"I was cool enough at that moment," Banker Rolfe hastened to say, speaking with grave calmness. "The brutal murder of poor Black seemed to turn my blood to ice in my veins. My brain was never clearer, though my limbs seemed benumbed."

"The two principal robbers called in six others, and they carried off all the bullion that had been stored in the vault. The shorter rascal who had me more particularly in charge, turned to make sure that nothing of value was left in the vault, casting the rays from his dark lantern into it as he did so. Mechanically I looked in the same direction. Then we were both startled by a sharp, angry exclamation from the lips of the taller man, who stood behind us, and we looked around. The smaller robber flashed the light full into the face of his comrade, whose feathered mask had dropped to the floor. Clearly as though at noonday, out under the bright sun, I saw his face and recognized it in an instant for that of Dan Brown!"

"Or of somebody who strongly 'sembled him," suggested Dodge.

"No, sir—Dan Brown and none other!" positively declared the banker. "I have seen the man frequently, not only here but in Denver. He had money on deposit with me. I could not possibly be mistaken. His face is a marked one, and once seen, not readily forgotten."

"Dan Brown is called a more than commonly smart man," slowly observed Enoch Dodge. "Ef he was the man, wouldn't he be a pesky fool not to hev shut off your wind at once when he saw you recognized him?"

"How much mercy did he show! What chance had I to escape with life enough to tell what had really occurred—what I had discovered? I was gagged, bound hand and foot. The building was fired in several places, with pitchpine and turpentine. The door was closed and locked—"

"Yet you did escape, with only a few burns," observed Ellis.

"Thanks to the fire being discovered almost immediately after they left. But you interrupted my statement, and jumped to a wrong conclusion; for neither of the robbers knew that I had noticed the unmasked face."

"The quick wheeling of the man who carried the lantern, threw me behind him, and in the shade. Thus I could see and not be seen. The murderer was in the act of stooping to recover his mask when I saw him. Before he rose erect, I was again facing the vault."

"He fiercely demanded whether I had noticed his face, but I was gagged, and of course could not answer. His mate spoke for me, and declared that I could not have done so. The other man—Dan Brown—was not satisfied, but then said that it mattered little, for dead men could tell no tales. Then they set the place afire and left me."

"As neat a bit o' deviltry as ever I knowed!" said Dodge, reflectively. "But it won't succeed. Not much! Dan Brown's double hes got to pay for the work his hands did."

"Then you still believe your friend innocent?" incredulously exclaimed the banker.

"I know he is. The hull thing was put up from the start, to down Dan, an' at the same time make a neat little haul to pay 'em fer the trouble an' the risk they run."

"Jest rub your eyes clear o' prejudice, an' look at it from the stan'p'int o' common sense. Mark the workin's from fust to last. Would a man who acted all through the job so cool as he did, be one to yell out when his face came on-kivered? Wouldn't he 'a' sooner clapped it on ag'in without a word, or any how turned his back onto ye afore he spoke?"

"Stan's to reason he would, or 'sposin' he was the big fool he made you think, wouldn't he hev slit your throat at once, rather than run any risks, seeing they 'lowed to rub you out in the end, any way?"

"You may argue until your head is white as snow, but I'll never change my opinion," obstinately muttered Rolfe. "It was Dan Brown's face I saw, and none other. I swore to that when I had Ellis arrest him—I will swear to it before the jury when he is brought to trial for murdering—"

"Then you will swear to a lie, black as hell itself!"

Fear and distinct these words rang through the room, but they did not come from the lips of either Enoch Dodge or the city marshal. From toward the door, and swiftly they glanced in that direction.

Wondering exclamations burst from their lips, for there was a fourth presence in the room.

Leaning back against the door in an attitude

of careless grace, was a tall man dressed in the rough garb of a miner, whose big eyes were blue, whose heavy beard and mustaches were tawny, and whose white teeth gleamed through the hairy screen with a mocking smile that at least two of the trio had seen before.

How had he reached this position without attracting their attention? Enoch Dodge afterward swore that he had locked the door and put the key in his pocket, the more surely to guard against being interrupted while amicably discussing the case for and against Dan Brown of Denver. None of them had heard the door open—not one suspected the intrusion until those cold, stern words cut banker Rolfe short.

"Sol Scott, by all that's holy!" ejaculated Sam Ellis, starting to leave his chair.

"Keep your seats, gentlemen—don't let me interrupt your little drinking bout," uttered the bold intruder, adding more emphatically. "Nay, I insist—Keep your seats!"

With dexterous rapidity that showed how thoroughly accustomed he was to manipulating the tools, a brace of revolvers came out from their places of concealment and covered the astonished trio at the table.

"All above-board this deal, gentlemen," the stranger cried. "Place your empty hands on the table before you, and beware how you try to deal from the bottom. I'm not particularly anxious to burn powder, but if it *must* be done, I'll get in the first salute, mind that!"

"The fust trick is yours, stranger," coolly said Enoch Dodge, obeying orders and placing his naked hands upon the table before him, "but you can't keep up that whack all night. It didn't cost you nothin' to come in, but you won't git out so easy, mebbe."

Sam Ellis and banker Rolfe followed the example of their companion in silence, but there was a dangerous gleam in the eyes of the marshal that told he was only biding his time, that the bold game was not yet ended.

"Gentlemen, you look on me as an insolent intruder, and are even now trying to devise some means of turning the tables on me. If you should succeed, you would be dealing your friend, Dan Brown, his death-blow!"

"Talk is cheap, but it takes rocks fer to buy whisky," grunted Dodge. "You hain't no call fer to come in here without a invite. Spit out what you got to say, then pucker up in a hurry, or I'll crawl all over ye!"

"And thereby doom the man you call your friend to certain death. I know the whole story, and I came here to tell you the plain truth, if you will let me. Dan Brown is as innocent of the double crime charged against him as the babe yet unborn!"

"Stranger, make them words good, an' I'll stand by you ag'inst the hull world!" cried Enoch Dodge, earnestly.

"I came here to clear an innocent man from suspicion, at the risk of my own life; but it is uncomfortable, talking across loaded revolvers. Pledge me your words of honor that you will not take advantage of my courtesy, and I'll put up these playthings."

"You hev my word, stranger, an' good friends though both these gents be to me, afore they tetch you they must crawl over me!" impulsively cried Enoch Dodge.

"I agree, but only because I am anxious to get at the bottom facts of this strange case," coldly added Ellis. "Sol Scott knows he can trust my word."

"And so do I," smiled the stranger, his teeth gleaming.

"I meant you," bluntly added the city marshal.

"So you think I am Sol Scott? And you, Mr. Rolfe—whom do you take me for?"

"For what you are; Sol Scott, or at least the man who is known here by that name."

"No doubt you would be willing to swear to that, on oath—another proof that man's eyesight is not infallible. Take another look, Mr. Rolfe. Am I not the man who robbed you—who struck down Albus Black and left you bound and helpless to perish in the flames?"

"Not you either lie or are crazy when you say so. I can swear that you are neither of those rascals—"

"That proves just what your solemn oath is worth," sneered the intruder, tearing off his false wig and beard.

"Dan Brown or his double, by the Eternal!"

CHAPTER XX.

A COOL HAND.

THIS wondering ejaculation shot from the lips of Sam Ellis as he stared at the face thus abruptly unmasked—the face of Dan Brown, the Denver detective, or else that of one bearing a wondrously perfect resemblance to him.

One instant of stupefied amazement, then the three men instinctively leaped from their chairs to seize the bold intruder.

But the stranger—Dan Brown or his double—was not to be caught napping. Each hand whipped forth a revolver, and the deadly weapons covered them.

"Remember your pledges, gentlemen, or I'll be obliged to recall them after a disagreeable manner," he cried, his voice stern and menacing. "I did not come here to commit suicide,

to thrust my head into the noose that threatened Dan Brown's throat. My object was to prove to Mr. Rolfe his mistake in swearing that the Denver detective robbed him and killed Albus Black, not to surrender myself to justice. Resume your seats for at the first step forward, attempt to draw a weapon, at least two of you die!"

The arising was purely mechanical, and all three paused when the unknown flashed forth his weapons. Not wholly from fear, but because they remembered the pledges they had voluntarily given the mysterious intruder.

In silence Sam Ellis and Edward Rolfe sunk back into their chairs. The face of the marshal wore a look of almost ludicrous doubt and amazement, but there was a peculiar expression on that of the banker—a look of suspicion that was rapidly becoming conviction.

"Stranger," cried Enoch Dodge, earnestly, "you may be the blackest rascal unhung, but darn me ef I couldn't hug you like a love-sick gal fer this! You're runnin' this resk to save the best an' whitest fri'nd I ever knowed, an' ef thar was a thousan' murders restin' onto your soul, I'd fight ag'inst any an' everybody as tried to 'rest ye now! You've got my word, an' thar's my hand—"

"The hand of an honest man, too, else common report lies," laughed Dan Brown's double. "Any man might be proud to clasp it as a friend—but friends you and I can never be! There's a bloody grave between us, though you know it not. Some day we must have a reckoning that will end in your death or mine—perhaps both. For the present, resume your seat."

With a thoroughly puzzled air, the worthy mayor obeyed.

"Durned ef I know what you're drivin' at," he muttered, perplexedly scratching his head. "I know I never sot my two eyes onto ye afore, an' what quarrel we kin hev—"

"The solution of your doubts will come in good time, never fear," coldly interposed Dan Brown's double. "Did you speak, sir?" he added, turning sharply toward Rolfe.

The face of the banker wore a cynical smile. The wine he had drank lent him an unwonted degree of courage, and there was bitter mockery in his tones as he said:

"Oh, no—I am too deeply interested in watching this little farce to interrupt it before the right time comes."

"Better a farce than the bitter, black tragedy you would have caused by swearing an innocent man's life away!"

"If Dan Brown is set free, as you seem to hope, and is the honest detective all have until now believed him, he will take your trail and hunt you down—am I not right?"

"If he should act as you say, he would only be doing his sworn duty," coolly responded the strange man, replacing his disguise. "If by my means he is set free, then we will be even. I will have paid the debt I owe him, and can meet him without fear or favor. My hand has kept my head against enemies his equal in cunning and courage. I do not fear but what it can do so again."

"But we are wasting time in idle talk. I have pressing business on hand, and no doubt you wish to return to your wine. I'll not keep you long—only to explain why I have taken this trouble to clear the man who is the most dangerous adversary we knights of the road have ever encountered."

"Who I am—what my real name, does not concern you in the least. Enough that my early training should have proved a safeguard against my falling so low—but it did not. I am not abusing fate. I made myself what I am, and will meet the consequences like a man when the last turn is called. I only mentioned the past, to explain how I came to have a pure and true-hearted wife; one who clung to me through all evil report."

"I was hunted hotly by the hounds of the law, and at last they nearly bagged me. I escaped, but the nest was still warm. They found my wife, and questioned her. She could not lie—she owned that I had been there, but would say no more. They were furious. They threatened her, but she was still firm. Then they were about to put their threats into execution—what those threats were, I leave you to guess."

"A man came up, and cowed them. He saved my wife from dishonor. That man, as I afterward learned, was Dan Brown of Denver. Do you wonder that I felt grateful to him—that I vowed to repay the debt with interest, if ever the opportunity arose?"

"My wife died soon after—from the effects of the fright and abuse she received at the hands of those cowardly hounds—and I naturally drifted from bad to worse, finally bringing up here."

"I planned the robbery of your bank—I put that plan into execution—I dealt the blow that killed young Black, and I meant that you should roast in your own building. It was my face you saw—though I never suspected that you had caught sight of it when my mask fell."

"Dan Brown knew nothing of the affair until it was over. Two of my spies can swear that they were following him among the hills at that

very hour—or would, only the confession would surely put the rope around their own throats instead of his."

"I swear that Dan Brown is innocent—that I am the guilty one—"

"I believe your oath—that you are guilty, not that Dan Brown is innocent," interrupted Rolfe, with a hard laugh and a peculiar smile.

"If one, then the other follows, as a matter of course."

"Not exactly," smiled the banker.

"If you saw us both together, side by side, my face undisguised, which one would you swear dealt that blow?"

"If that could happen, I could not swear—but it never will, never can—because you are Dan Brown himself!"

Enoch Dodge stared from one to the other in open-eyed amazement, while Sam Ellis moved uneasily in his seat, hardly knowing what to do or say, for the same belief had been his from the moment their strange visitor removed his mask—the false beard and wig that made him so greatly resemble Sol Scott the miner.

Of them all—the unknown alone remained cool and composed beneath the startling accusation. A low, mocking laugh parted his lips.

"It is lucky for the welfare of your immortal soul, Mr. Rolfe, that you are not now under oath. Already you have perjured yourself twice, since I came in, though I give you credit for believing you are speaking the truth. Dan Brown never robbed your bank, nor am I he."

"What is your opinion, Mr. Ellis?" asked the banker. "Who is this gentleman—Dan Brown or not?"

"I hardly dare say—only a minute ago I swore he was Sol Scott. If Dan Brown, how did he get out of jail?"

"Now we are nearing bed-rock!" cried the unknown. "Mr. Rolfe, if you positively knew that Dan Brown of Denver was at this very moment in the jail—that he had not set foot outside of that building since he surrendered last night—and knowing as you do that he denies being the criminal, while I as positively admit my agency—could you, after seeing the face I have shown you, swear that Dan Brown killed Albus Black and robbed your bank?"

"Answer him as ef you was on oath, an' may the devil grill you forever an' ever ef you lie!" cried Enoch Dodge.

"No, I could not make oath, if you are not Dan Brown."

The answer came slowly but plain enough, for the banker was really an honest and conscientious man.

"That settles it, then!" cried the unknown, exultantly. "Dan Brown is now in jail, strongly guarded, and all you have to do is to go there, see him, question the men on duty—"

"I must see you two together first," stubbornly declared Rolfe. "There's so much hocus-pocus and juggling about this business that nothing less will convince me. I still declare that you are Dan Brown. I believe you have managed to escape from confinement—perhaps by bribing the guard—and come here to throw dust in my eyes. I believe this supper forms a portion of the plot—that both of you gentlemen are mixed up with it, somehow," he added, hotly, turning upon Dodge and Ellis. "If not—if you are innocent of complicity in this bold scheme—I call on you to help me arrest this self-acknowledged murderer!"

Never before had the naturally timid banker been so thoroughly worked up and reckless of personal peril, he would have leaped upon Dan Brown's double, had not the strong hand of Enoch Dodge held him back.

"My word is passed an' no man sha'n't make me out a liar. Set down, Rolfe, an' 'have yourself!"

"Another motion like that, Mr. Rolfe, and Dan Brown will be acquitted for lack of an accuser," coldly said the detective's double.

"He is not so much to blame," said Sam Ellis, slowly. "Like him, I am in a fog. If you are Dan Brown—though I can't understand how on earth you managed to give the boys the slip, for bribe them I know you couldn't—then it is my duty to arrest you. If you are not, then my duty is the same, and a thousand times more agreeable to me."

"If Dan Brown can't be cleared by any less heroic measures, I will surrender myself to justice and suffer in his stead. But the testimony of you three gentlemen will prove sufficient, after you have seen us both together."

"That is all we ask—side by side, face to face," said Rolfe.

"You shall have your desire fully gratified, provided you agree to my terms. You must disarm yourselves and leave your weapons here. You must promise to make no attempt to arrest me until after I have convinced you that I am not Dan Brown. You must utter no word, make no sign that can betray me while we pass along the street. Promise this, and I will go with you to the jail and there unmask before the real Dan Brown."

"You say nothing against my arresting you afterward?"

"No. My hand can keep my head, even against so good a man as you undoubtedly are, Sam Ellis."

"That point understood, then, I agree to your terms," said the marshal, unbuckling his belt of weapons and placing it upon the table.

"An' I agree without any ifs or ands," chimed in Enoch Dodge, following suit, his honest eyes fairly dancing with joy. "I'll never lift a finger ag'inst you in the futur' ef you kin clear my old side pardner!"

The banker said nothing, but drew a small revolver from his hip pocket and placed it with the rest on the table. He seemed dazed, yet suspicious. He knew that the man before them was Dan Brown of Denver, impossible as that seemed, and he resolved to detect the imposition at all hazards.

"Mr. Ellis, you will oblige me by leading the way, in company with Mr. Rolfe. Not that I doubt either of you, but I am playing a hazardous game, staking my life against nothing, and I would be foolish to throw away a single chance. Mr. Dodge, will you take my arm?"

No objection being raised, the quartette left the room, descended the private flight and reached the street without seeing or being seen by any person. Then, in the order chosen by Dan Brown's double, they hastened on to the jail.

The men were still on guard duty, just as the marshal had placed them at dusk, and Sam Ellis drew a deep breath of relief. He believed them incorruptible, still he felt that the stranger must be Dan Brown himself until he saw his men quietly guarding the jail. Surely their prisoner could not have escaped!

"All well, Moses?" he asked. "There's been no more trouble?"

The man responded in the affirmative first, then in the negative. All was well, and no one had tried to raise another row.

"I bring some friends to visit the prisoner. I know you will be glad to hear that there is a fair prospect of clearing him of this dreadful charge."

"I never gave it a moment's credit. That fool banker was so bad scared he could see anything, and so pitched onto the first man that he thought of," replied Moses, in the deep shadow failing to recognize Rolfe.

"Come in, gentlemen," hurriedly added Ellis, desirous of saving the feelings of both men.

Edward Rolfe was shaping a cutting retort that should annihilate the disrespectful policeman, but Ellis forced him along before he could give it utterance.

Ahead of them shone a dim light, which all knew came from the cell of the Denver detective, and all else was forgotten in the intense interest of the moment. Was Dan Brown still there? Could it be possible that there existed another man so exactly his double as to deceive even his most intimate friends?

Three hearts beat almost suffocatingly in those few moments of doubt—then Enoch Dodge flung open the cell door, falling upon the neck of his friend in a frenzy of delight, almost sobbing aloud.

Dan Brown stared at his visitors in blank amazement.

"What is it, gentlemen? Something new turned up?"

"Thar's the man what killed young Black!" cried Dodge, pointing to the unknown. "He owns it up himself—"

"Not Sol Scott?" ejaculated the detective, bewildered. "How could any man in his senses mistake me for him?" but abruptly pausing as he remembered that such a mistake had been made, and by the wife of his bosom.

"No, not Sol Scott, only a good imitation," laughed the masked man, removing his disguise. "Now, Mr. Rolfe, are you satisfied? Look at our faces. Mark them closely. And then, on your honor, say which was the face you saw last night while you were being robbed!"

Fear Rolfe stared from one to the other, his eyes wildly distended, his face growing purple as his stupor deepened.

Line for line, there was a marvelous resemblance between the two men. And as Dan Brown arose to his feet, there was a similar likeness in their forms. Two statues, cast in the same mold, could not be more alike than these two men.

Dan Brown's double laughed softly as he once more replaced his mask of beard and wig combined.

"You are satisfied now, I presume, Mr. Rolfe?" he asked.

"But I am not," sternly cried the detective. "You are the assassin for whose sins I have been arrested and nearly butchered like a cur! I have occupied your place long enough—now you shall take mine!"

"Hold hard, mate!" and the bony arms of Enoch Dodge enveloped his friend with a power that would not be denied. "He came here under the safeguard of our honor. He's said enough to clear you from this charge, an' not even you kin make us liars by 'restin' him now."

"I have paid the debt I owe you, Dan Brown," coldly said his double. "After this, if you try to hunt me down, I will not hesitate to strike

back. Mr. Ellis, be kind enough to see that your men do not prevent my departure."

"Certainly," promptly responded the marshal. "I said that if you kept your word, you should leave the jail unmolested. After that, you were to guard yourself."

"Exactly, and I think I can do it, too. But first, Mr. Rolfe, have you decided which one of us two is the criminal?"

"It was you, Dan Brown or the devil—may the foul fiend fly away with me if I can swear to either!" spluttered the banker.

Dan Brown's double turned away with a laugh, and accompanied by Ellis and Dodge, left the prison.

The instant they passed the shattered doors, Ellis said:

"I have kept my word. You are outside—now surrender!"

Like a flash something hard struck him, and felled him to the ground. Dan Brown's double darted around the corner of the jail—then came the clatter of hoofs and a mocking laugh!

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER THE VERDICT.

THE unfortunate clerk, Albus Black died in the arms of his fair young betrothed just as the sun was sinking to rest on the day following the bold robbery of Rolfe's bank. Unless it was when he rushed forth from the blazing building with that maniacal screech, his scanty clothing all afire, his consciousness never returned after receiving that dastard blow from the revolver of Dan Brown's double. When it was seen that he could not long survive, persistent efforts were made to obtain his death-bed deposition, but in vain. He died without sound or sign.

Word was immediately dispatched to the coroner, but owing to different causes, he did not reach the spot until the next day, and it was nearly noon before his jury was impaneled and all in readiness for hearing the evidence.

But little work was done in or around Golconda that day. From the first, excitement had been intense, the gathering of the frenzied mob—the thrilling scenes at and around the jail where three true hearts saved the accused from a dog's death—had only served to increase the general interest. And then there were vague rumors flying about the town concerning strange discoveries made and soon to be developed—hints that Dan Brown of Denver would be replaced by the real criminal—and a thousand rumors equally wild.

The nature of the case and the evidence to be given has already been shadowed forth with sufficient clearness to render a full report of the coroner's inquest unnecessary, besides consuming space which can be better employed.

The sensation expected by the eager crowd came when Edward P. Rolfe gave, in his testimony. He told his story frankly, and the cunning conspirators interchanged glances of significant meaning as the banker told why he had sworn out the warrant against Dan Brown of Denver. But then he went on to narrate the strange incidents of the past evening. Their joy became bewildered consternation. What did it mean?

Paul Gerux flashed a venomous glance at King Carmichael, and gradually edged his way out of the crowd toward a stout, swift horse which he had taken the precaution to tether close at hand in case of emergency.

City Marshal Ellis and Enoch Dodge, mayor of Grenada, followed banker Rolfe, substantiating his strange story under oath.

The case went to the jury, who shortly returned the only verdict that could be given under the circumstances. Willful murder, against parties unknown.

The long suppressed excitement found vent in one loud, long cheer, and as Edward P. Rolfe promptly withdrew his charge against Dan Brown of Denver, that worthy was released from confinement, and received a perfect ovation from the very men who, a few hours before, were bent on hanging him like a sheep-killing cur.

An American crowd is never quite happy without a speech or two, and in response to the calls, Dan Brown mounted a convenient dry-goods box, and briefly addressed them, being followed by Sam Ellis and Enoch Dodge.

Each one of the trio declared that the murdered man should not go unavenged, if their united efforts could bring the cold-blooded assassin to justice.

These speeches were cheered to the very echo, by none more loudly than those who had worked hardest to raise the mob against the Denver detective. They felt that they were under suspicion, for the bold words of Sam Ellis while defending Dan Brown from the lynchers, had taken root. One and all felt themselves watched by suspicious eyes.

Neither Paul Gerux nor King Carmichael were with the crowd now. As soon as they saw that Dan Brown was bound to be cleared, they edged away from the group, the former following the latter until they were alone, then joining him with an ugly frown upon his swart face.

"Come along to Tim Ragdon's saloon," he growled, a glittering devil in his eyes that

boded danger to the tall vagabond. "There's something been going on that I don't understand, and you've got to make it clear."

"I only wish I could!" muttered Carmichael, uneasily.

Gerux laughed hardly, but neither of them said anything more until they were safely ensconced in the little room behind the groggery where we saw them receive the startling report of their negro spy, nearly a week before.

Gerux drew a revolver, cocked it and covered King Carmichael as that worthy turned around from locking the door.

"Now, old man," he said in a low, deadly tone, "tell me why you have been playing a double hand in this game?"

"Lower your gun, or devil a word will I speak," declared the vagabond, his face a shade paler, but giving no other evidence of fear.

Gerux complied, so far as resting the weapon upon the table, but still keeping it cocked and his finger on the trigger.

"Now speak out. If you try to deceive me, I'll kill you."

"What do you charge me with?" quietly demanded Carmichael.

"Bah! you know well enough. Why did you undo all of our work, by playing that cursed trick? Only for you, Dan Brown would this moment be branded a murderer—"

"You are barking up the wrong tree, pard. I never played that hand, because I know that while Dan Brown breathes, my throat is in danger. I was not in town last night, as I can prove by a dozen witnesses. I didn't get in until after daylight. Tim Ragdon can tell as much."

"Then who the devil could it have been?"

"No friend of ours, be sure of that. Who, I can't even guess."

"If not you, then there's three Dan Browns in the field! By the Lord! the ground is growing shaky under our feet!"

"There's only one we need fear—the original. The other, whoever he may be, dare not show his face after the confession he made, for he would be mobbed, sure!"

"You are no safer. Let me but utter a hint of the truth, and your cunning disguise would not save you."

"I'd live long enough to utter your death-warrant, anyhow," coolly retorted Carmichael. "But let's drop this. We can't afford to quarrel just now. We're knee-deep in the mire, and there's only one way out of it. Dan Brown must die. You must stir Sol Scott up. If he can't rub the cuss out, then I mean to throw up my hand in the game and leave."

"If you try that, you'll bring up at the end of a rope," fiercely cried the Frenchman. "I'll set the blood-hounds on your track at the first sign of flinching. You've got to see the game out. Dan Brown must die. Rachel Brown must be my wife—"

"You agreed Sol Scott should have her."

"I don't think he'll live long enough to claim his reward, when once his work is done. If Dan Brown don't settle him, the gallows will."

"It's a pity to spoil such a good man, but have your own way. When do you mean to see him?"

"As soon as I can change my rig. Do you wait for me here, I'll not be gone long. It may be that Sol Scott will turn rusty, and we have to try some other plan," said the Frenchman, leaving the room.

Half an hour later, under an altogether different disguise, looking like an old and poverty-stricken bum, his head and face masked by a wilderness of tangled white hair, Paul Gerux was shambling along toward the mine of which Sol Scott was overseer.

All mines near Golconda were empty of workmen that day, and the disguised Frenchman found Sol Scott alone, seated in the door of his little cabin, quietly enjoying his pipe. His big blue eyes were raised as the seeming wreck on whisky's shore drew near, but if they penetrated the disguise, their owner gave no sign.

Gerux was in no mood for wasting time in beating about the bush. He glanced keenly around the place and then, assured that no curious ears were nigh enough to overhear their conversation, he said, bluntly:

"The grace allowed you expired last night, Sol Scott. I come to receive your decision."

"Grace and decision on what? Speak plainer, uncle, if you want me to understand you," coolly said the miner.

"Bah! you know well enough what I mean. Are you trying to play a double hand? Have you got some one hidden in there, to hear my words?" suspiciously demanded the Frenchman, taking the alarm.

"Step inside and search, if you like. There's nothing lying around loose valuable enough to stick to your fingers, I don't reckon," drawled the miner.

"What the devil do you take me for?" growled the disguised Frenchman, cut to the quick and unable to restrain himself, though he was sorry the moment the words left his lips.

"For a thief, robber and maybe assassin," coolly retorted Sol Scott, never moving a finger though he saw the seeming bum was grasp-

ing a pistol butt. "The Owls, unless reported saddy slanders them, glory in these honorable titles, and Major Owlet should not flinch when the coat is pulled over his shoulders."

"I am not the man you think," said Gerux, speaking more composedly. "I am only his messenger, sent to receive your answer to the proposition made you one week ago."

"Concerning Dan Brown, you mean?"

The disguised Frenchman nodded assent.

"Suppose I tell you that I'll have nothing more to do with the matter! That I never meant to, but only gave you that pledge because my life depended on it! That I am a white man, not a cowardly assassin nor the tool of assassins?"

"Do you give me this answer?" demanded Gerux.

"I said suppose. What would be the consequence?"

"That the Glory of Alabama would be looking for another foreman to-morrow."

"Not more surely than that the Owls would have to hold another election for chief," cried Sol Scott, leaping upon the astounded rascal and flinging him to the ground before he could touch a weapon or make a move to defend himself.

But his cool nerve quickly returned, and there was no trace of fear in his voice as he uttered:

"You are barking up the wrong tree, Sol Scott. I repeat I am not Major Owlet, only his messenger. You can kill me, or hand me over to the authorities if you think you can establish a case against me, but to do either will seal your death-warrant. All the band know I am here. If harm befalls me, you will not live an hour longer. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Sol Scott laughed coldly as he released his grasp and suffered the disguised conspirator to arise.

"I know you are not the chief of the Owls. I acted as I have, because you came at me, not as one comrade in crime should approach another, but as though you thought me your slave, condemned to do your bidding and bear your insolence in fear and trembling. If you are not a fool, you will take this little lesson to heart, and govern yourself accordingly."

Paul Gerux arose and rearranged his beard, which had partially slipped away when he was overthrown. Then, cool as ever he added:

"Once more I ask your answer. It is either your life or the life of Dan Brown. Kill him, and the Owls are at your command. Refuse, or fail, and they will redder their beaks in your heart's blood."

"I care no more for your threats than I did when your gang held me prisoner. If I kill Dan Brown, it is through no love for you or yours, but because I have resolved to make his widow my wife."

"Then you will kill him?" eagerly cried Gerux.

"I'll try. He is no slouch, and my toes may be the ones fated to turn up, for bad as I may have been, I never yet assassinated a man in cold blood—save one."

"No matter how, just so he dies. The devil of a detective has as many lives as a cat!"

"Be around town to-night, and maybe you'll see some fun."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this: before morning either Dan Brown or Sol Scott will be dead," coolly returned the tall miner.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHICH SHALL BE CHIEF?

GOLCONDA seemed fated to enjoy a swift succession of startling sensations. The worthy citizens were hardly given time to recover from one surprise before another burst upon them.

The inquest was over; the coroner's jury had delivered their verdict; Edward P. Rolfe publicly withdrew his mistaken charge against Dan Brown, and the Denver detective was released from prison; but now, as the shades of night settled over the valley which contained the lively little mining town, a new phase of the mysterious affair was presented to the excitement-loving miners—one that bade fair to culminate in the burning of powder in deadly earnest.

Sol Scott seemed determined to make good his boast to the disguised Frenchman, and as the night fell, he showed a new side of his character to the Golcondans.

Never before had they any of them seen him at all under the influence of liquor, but this evening was an exception. The tall miner drank freely, and insisted on everybody else within call joining him. And as the liquor went down, his usual grave taciturnity vanished. His tongue ran freely, and was pointed with poison whenever the conversation turned upon the inquest that day.

At last one of the jurymen plucked up courage enough to reply to him.

"We gave our verdict in strict accordance with the testimony offered. What else could we do? Those three gentlemen—Rolfe, Ellis and Dodge—swore that another man confessed that he killed Black—"

"I heard the whole thing, and I knew then, what I say now, that either there was some cunning jugglery in that pretended 'double' business, or that they one and all swore to a point-blank lie! Bah! the whole story is a lie on its face! They say they had the real criminal in the jail, face to face with Dan Brown. They were four to one, and a strong guard outside. Yet the fellow escaped—knocked Sam Ellis down, mounted a horse that stood mighty convenient, and rode out of town."

"I don't blame you gentlemen of the jury: of course you had to decide according to the evidence. I don't blame the guard, for they may have been hoodwinked—but I do say this much: if the prisoner had been anybody but a so-called officer of justice, with a powerful rich and mighty handsome wife, the chances are a thousand to one that no such marvellous discovery would have been made, and that for once a cowardly assassin would have to pay the just punishment for his crime!"

Almost in silence this bold denunciation was received. Since his duel in the air with big Vernon Shadutz, Sol Scott was regarded as a privileged character, and none there cared to cross him, even by venturing an opinion contrary to the one he expressed. All saw that he was drinking unusually heavily, and felt that the tall miner was on the war-path.

Several of them, busy-bodies who would like nothing better than to see a collision between two such notables as Sol Scott and Dan Brown, slipped away and rapidly spread the news. In half an hour it was known all over Golconda, and wherever Sol Scott went, the crowd followed, eager to see the "fun" which was almost certain to follow if Dan Brown, Sam Ellis or Enoch Dodge got wind of the facts.

In the Dew Drop Inn, Sol Scott was even more severe in his strictures.

"I believe Edward P. Rolfe swore to the truth when he had Dan Brown arrested: why he swore just the contrary at the inquest, perhaps Dan Brown or Dan Brown's pretty wife can tell. Yet the old dandy is such a softy, that he may have been deceived—I have no quarrel with him, and am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt; but the man who says or believes that Dan Brown did not rob the bank and murder Albus Black, is worse than a fool—"

"I say he didn't, an' ef you say so, you lie!"

The clear, sharp voice from the door, and Sol Scott wheeled swiftly in that direction, hand on revolver.

The tall form of Enoch Dodge stood just within the portals, a hard look upon his rugged face, a blazing light in his honest gray eyes, a cocked revolver in his hand and half-leveled.

Instantly there was a wide, clear space between the antagonists as the crowd hastily divided and fell back. Ike Tampkin once more dove beneath his bar, cursing the fates that made his saloon such a favorite place for the angry meeting of fire-eaters when about to burn powder.

When Sol Scott saw who the bold speaker was, his hand dropped from his weapon, and the hard look on his face softened.

"Hard words those, Mr. Dodge—"

"I'm ready to back 'em up, mister man—whoever you be," bluntly interrupted the mayor of Grenada. "'Tain't my natur' to stan' by an' hear a fr'ind slandered. Draw your gun, an' sail in. I said you lie, an' now I 'peat it!"

"I have no particular quarrel with you, sir—"

"Takin' water, by thunder?" cried Dodge, with a mocking laugh. "I thought you crowed powerful like a dung-hill!"

"—unless you force it upon me," coldly added Scott, as though no interruption had occurred.

"You lied 'bout my fr'ind," repeated Enoch. "You've got to fight me, or else git down onto your knees an' 'pologize fer what you said ag'inst Dan Brown."

"Does Dan Brown hide behind you—is he afraid to take up his own quarrels? If so—if he is such a craven, name your tools and I'll flog him over your shoulders," insolently sneered the tall miner.

"You kin bark loud enough when he ain't here—ef he was, you'd drop your tail an' run a blue streak!"

"Bring him here and I'll say the same to his face—that Dan Brown is a cowardly assassin—"

"Stop right whar you be, or I'll cut it short with a blue pill!" cried Enoch Dodge, sternly. "You've said enough, an' more'n enough to measure your karkidge fer a wooden overcoat. Ef you ain't all wind, stop here, an' I'll go bunt up Dan Brown—"

"Spare yourself the trouble, Dodge: Dan Brown is here to speak for himself," rung out a clear, resolute voice, as the Denver detective entered the saloon.

Swift as thought Sol Scott drew a revolver and covered his man, but Dan Brown made no attempt to imitate the action, smiling coldly as he faced the deadly weapon.

"Unless you are the coward you have been calling me behind my back, Sol Scott, put up your pistols. I am a gentleman, and there is a gentlemanly manner of settling these little dif-

ferences," he said, as cool and composed as though not covered by a weapon that seldom missed its aim.

"Pull trigger an' I blow ye through!" snarled Dodge.

"Quiet, Enoch," sharply said Dan Brown. "Put up your weapon. This quarrel is between me and Mr. Scott."

"I ask odds of no man," said the tall miner, calmly lowering his weapon and returning it to his belt. "All I want is a fair deal. This camp isn't large enough for us two, and if you ask a regular duel, I'm your man."

"Most happy to hear it—if you had not, I should have insisted on a duel. You have foully slandered me and I mean to kill you," coldly uttered the detective.

"Unless I do that little job for you, instead," retorted the tall miner. "Just so one of us goes under. I don't care much which. There can't be two 'chiefs' in Golconda!"

"Enough of idle talk," impatiently cried Dan Brown. "If you have a friend present, name him. Mr. Dodge will act for me."

"I'm not particular—you will serve me, Mr. Gerux?"

The Frenchman bowed acquiescence, though he inwardly cursed the chance that led Sol Scott to pitch on him for a second. He had strong reasons for not mixing himself up in the affair, but was taken so completely by surprise as to be unable to refuse.

Gerux and Dodge drew aside and conversed earnestly for several minutes, the crowd eagerly watching them.

A duel, conducted according to the "code" was a novelty in Golconda, and all the more interesting because, under such circumstances and with two such men as principals, it was almost certain to end in the death of one or both.

At length the two seconds separated and Gerux said, aloud:

"Gentlemen, this is the arrangement we have decided upon. The principals are to be armed alike with revolvers and knife. Mr. Brown is to cross over the river and stand at the further end of the bridge, Mr. Scott occupying a similar position on this side. Neither is to draw a weapon or advance until the word is given. When it is given, they are at liberty to open fire at once, or advance at will. No other person is permitted to step upon the bridge until one or both of the gentlemen fail, or cry 'Enough.'"

It was a curious arrangement, but one particularly satisfactory to the crowd, for by this means they could witness the movements of both parties from beginning to end without danger to themselves, as the two lamps, aided by the full moon, lighted up the entire bridge.

"One word for my own self," said Enoch Dodge, as Paul Gerux concluded. "Ef you've got a fr'ind, Mr. Scott, in this crowd, why not make it a fo'-handed affair? It'd give more fun fer thar money to these gents, an' suit me monstrous well."

"Will you accommodate the fire-eating gentleman?" demanded Scott, turning quickly to Gerux.

The Frenchman flushed hotly even through his swarthy skin, and replied hastily:

"I have no interest in this quarrel. You forced me to act as your second. I'll do no more."

"You're in hard luck, Mr. Dodge," said Scott, with a grim smile, "but if I come out of this right side up, I'll try hard to give you what you are seeking."

"Enoch, promise me one thing," interposed Dan Brown.

"Whatever you ax, it's promised aforehand," promptly.

"That you will steer clear of all quarrels, if anything serious should happen to me, until you can escort my wife safe back to Denver, or to her relatives."

The mayor of Grenada made a wry grimace. "You've ketched me foul, Dan, but I won't go back onto my word. But, mind ye—only ontel she's safe. Then I'm free to hunt him up, ef he rubs you out."

"As I mean to do," coldly uttered the tall miner. "And I'll not be hard to find, if you choose to seek me out."

"This world wouldn't be big enough fer you to hide in, ef you should try," quietly added Enoch.

"Enough. I am not dead yet. Let's get to work," cried the Denver detective, a little impatiently.

All preliminaries having been arranged by the seconds, there was nothing to do but to search the principals for concealed arms—an idea suggested by Paul Gerux—then at once proceed to the spot selected for the combat.

By this time word had spread all over town, and nearly every male inhabitant was out to witness the grand meet of two such celebrated "sports," together with not a few of the softer sex.

Ranged along each bank of the river, the spectators eagerly awaited the opening of the "circus," betting freely on whichever man they favored most. No odds were given. Public opinion seemed to look upon the duelists as very equally matched.

At first it was feared that the city marshal would try to stop the fight, and many were the anxious glances cast around in search of his tall form, and eager questions asked concerning his whereabouts.

"I see him an' some o' the boys ride out o' town jest afore sun-down," at length volunteered one fellow, and the welcome information was quickly circulated.

Their last fears put at rest, the crowd cunningly maneuvered with each other to secure the most advantageous position from whence to note every detail of the life and death encounter about to take place.

All was in readiness. Sol Scott stood at one end of the bridge, Dan Brown at the other, each clearly outlined by the mingled moonlight and the glare of the lamp beneath which they waited for the signal. Their arms were folded across their breasts. The stern, set look upon their faces told all that this was to be no everyday affair—that Golconda could have only one "chief," and he the survivor of that duel.

"All ready, gentlemen?" rung out the voice of Enoch Dodge.

"Ready!" came the prompt response from both duelists.

"Then cut loose—an' may the best man win!"

Slowly, with deliberate steadiness, the well-matched foemen stepped upon the bridge and advanced toward each other, their revolvers drawn and cocked. Nine men out of ten would have opened fire at once, hoping either to disable their antagonist or frustrate him, but not so with these; they knew each other's metal too well for that.

Not more than twenty paces separated the duelists, when the first hostile motion was made by Dan Brown of Denver.

Swiftly his weapon rose and exploded the moment it reached a level, but even more rapidly Sol Scott stooped low down and leaped swiftly aside, the ragged lead hissing harmlessly above his head.

Like an echo his revolver spoke, and a gasping cry ran along the ranks of eager spectators as they saw the Denver detective reel and stagger dizzily back, only kept from falling by the low hand-rail of the bridge.

They saw him raise his pistol—but it fell from his hand undischarged, and then Dan Brown fell headlong from the bridge!

CHAPTER XXIII.

SOL SCOTT TALKS BUSINESS.

INSTANTLY all was excitement the most intense.

If a sound came back from the lips of the ill-fated duelist, it was drowned by the half-groan, half-yell that came from the crowd of spectators. But even through this could be distinguished the sudden plash as the body of the Denver detective struck the dark, swift-running waters under the bridge.

Those who were near enough instantly flocked upon the bridge, the others lining the high banks, all peering over, eager to catch the first glimpse of the dead or dying man.

"Thar he goes!" screamed Enoch Dodge, shrilly. "The current's carryin' him down to'rds the rapids! Peel out an' git a boat—if he tetches them rocks, he'll be ground into sassaidge meat! Clar the way!"

Like a mad bull he plunged headlong into the crowd that had followed him onto the bridge, and when those competing it did not, or could not, open a passage for him soon enough, his bony fists came into rapid play, knocking the obstructions right and left and giving more than one Golconda an unpleasant souvenir in the shape of battered nose or blackened eye by which to remember that night.

Those who had not yet entered upon the bridge, catching the high-pitched cries of Enoch Dodge, ran hastily along the banks, downstream, eagerly looking for the reappearance of Dan Brown, either dead or dying. This rush removed the pressure, and Enoch Dodge soon reached land, rushing down the high bank, terribly excited.

Little wonder that such should be the case. If once drawn within the power of those churning rapids, the most powerful and skillful swimmer that ever clove water would be helpless almost as a wailing babe. Certain death awaited him upon those sharp, hungry-looking rocks against and around which the black waters roared and raged, beating themselves into spray and foam.

And all knew that Dan Brown, if still living, must be seriously disabled by the bullet of Sol Scott. The manner in which he fell amply proved that.

Little hope for him, then. Death by bullet, water or rocks!

There were no boats in use along the river, and learning this, Enoch Dodge hastened along the bank, peering over in quest of his friend, tearing off his outer garments as if with the insane intention of plunging into the stream.

Suddenly he stopped short, and with a wild, unnatural cry, pointed out some object dancing amid the foam-lightened waters, just where the hungry rocks lay thickest.

"Thar he goes! Last—the best friend an' whitest man that ever drewed breath!"

Then the tall form sunk in a nerveless heap to the ground, covering face with hands.

In silence the rough miners stood around him, respecting his grief. They knew that there was no use in following the stream further. Even a senseless log of drift-wood could not pass that terrific gantlet unscathed. And if it came out below, battered, bruised and pounded into splinters, what chance had a disabled man? Not one. Before this he was a mangled mass hardly to be recognized as humanity.

Sol Scott did not join in the headlong rush down the river bank. Cold and impassive he had watched his noted antagonist reel and then fall over the hand-rail. Unmoved he held his pistol in readiness for self-defense as the crowd rushed forward, lest some among them should try to avenge the Denver detective in the mad excitement of the moment. Then when the cry of Enoch Dodge sent all running toward the rapids, the tall miner retained his position, one hand resting lightly upon the shoulder of Paul Gerux, as though to guard against his joining in this rush.

"I've kept my promise—are you satisfied?" coldly demanded Sol Scott as they two alone were left on the bridge.

"What promise? I don't understand," faltered Gerux.

"Bah! don't try to play with me," sharply said Sol Scott, his fingers contracting until it seemed to the Frenchman as though they would meet in the flesh. "I am not in the humor for standing much nonsense to-night. I recognized you through your disguise to-day. For that reason I selected you as my second. I was bound you should have no excuse for thinking I slighted my work. Again I say, are you satisfied?"

"He may escape after all. Curse him! he has more lives than a cat!" growled the Frenchman, uneasily.

Sol Scott laughed icily.

"He carries my bullet within an inch of his heart, at the outside, as you will see if ever his carcass turns up. But even if not dead before his body touched the water—as I believe he was—what chance has he? Not the faintest. By this he is among those rocks—when he passes them, the very mother that bore him would not be able to recognize her son!"

During this speech, Paul Gerux had time to collect his wits, and still hoped to throw the tall miner off the scent, so far as concerned his identity with one of those who planned the death of Dan Brown of Denver.

"After all, the matter has but little interest for me. Dan Brown was once the means of sending a good friend of mine to the gallows. Only for that, I would not have cared much which one of you came out the victor. You gave me no choice; but to act as your second. I filled that position to the best of my ability, and you need my services no longer. Therefore, allow me to wish you a very good night—"

"Not yet, Paul Gerux," firmly interposed the tall miner. "There are a few words I must speak to you before we part. Don't crowd me too hard. The evil blood is fairly awakened in me this evening, and you may get hurt. Come. The crowd will be returning in a few moments, and what I have to say, if overheard, might fit a noose around each of our throats."

Paul Gerux was strongly tempted to draw a pistol or knife and use them as he well knew how, but a subtle something—not exactly fear, yet something akin to that feeling—restrained his hand, and in silence he followed the lead of Sol Scott.

The tall miner strode on ahead, like one who gave no thought to treachery, and perhaps it was this very recklessness that checked the murderous impulse felt by Paul Gerux. Did he bear a charmed life, or was the interview to be a friendly one, after all?

The question was soon answered. The cabin situated near the mouth of the "Glory of Alabama" mine was reached, and entering, Sol Scott struck a light.

"Sit down, Mr. Gerux," he said, placing a rude stool for his reluctant guest, then seating himself at the opposite side of the table. "We may as well talk at our ease."

"I have come with you, rather than risk a street quarrel," said the Frenchman, slowly, "but I am all in the dark as to what you want of me."

"Come, play your hand openly and above-board. I am a better friend than enemy, as you should know by this time. I penetrated your disguise to-day. I know you are the masked champion of the Owls who refused to meet me with your chosen weapons. More than that, I know you are the genuine Major Owlet, though one of your men acted in that capacity—"

"I am not," quickly cried Gerux, casting a swift glance around the dimly lighted room as though fearful other ears might catch that dangerous charge.

"We are alone," quietly said Sol Scott. "You need not fear eavesdroppers here. Listen. I can put you on the track of a regular bonanza,

such as the Owls never yet struck, and I will do it if you keep your pledge to me—if you make me chief of the band—"

"I tell you I have not the power to do so," impatiently cried Gerux. "I am not Major Owlet, nor am I one of the band. I admit that you saw me there, that night. I am a friend of Owlet, and together we have been working against the man you killed to-night. But beyond that friendship I have not the slightest influence."

"Well, tell him, then. Tell him this. I can be a good ally, but a worse enemy. I have not been idle during the last week. I know where you rendezvous. I know nearly every member of the band. More than that, I know whose hand it was that robbed old Rolfe and killed Albus Black. If I chose to do so, I could have the murderer arrested before morning, and could lead Sam Ellis and his crowd to the retreat—but I do not so choose."

"All these secrets are safe with me, if the Owls keep their pledge. I am to be chief of the band, and they are to help me secure Dan Brown's wife. It was for this that I killed Dan Brown—no less glorious prize would have led me to lift a finger against him."

"Tell this to your friend, Major Owlet. Say that I must have his decision by noon to-morrow. If he refuses to keep his pledge, or if he tries to flee, I swear to put the blood-hounds of the law on his track, and head them myself until he and all connected with him are hunted down."

Cold and outwardly unmoved Paul Gerux listened to the rapidly uttered words; when Sol Scott ceased, he arose and said quietly:

"I will deliver your message. Beyond that, I will not mix further in the matter. It is you and the Owls for it. Have you anything further to say?"

"Only this. I have jotted down all the discoveries I have made, and placed the paper, closely sealed, into safe hands. If anything should happen to me, the party has orders to hand that paper to Sam Ellis without the loss of a single moment. It may save trouble if you mention this fact to your friend."

"I will do so. Good-night," and with a cold bow, the Frenchman left the cabin.

But the moment he was out of sight of the cabin, his enforced calmness disappeared and a torrent of curses and imprecations poured from his lips. He cursed the audacious miner "up hill and down."

"If I thought he was lying—if I knew he had prepared no such paper—I would kill the infernal devil this very night! Instead of a tool, we have found a master—Satan grill him alive!" he snarled, fairly frothing at the mouth so intense was his rage.

He found King Carmichael in the little room behind Tim Ragdon's saloon, and closing the door securely, sunk into a chair with a deep, venomous curse.

The tall vagabond stared at him open-eyed.

"What's up now?" he ejaculated. "I thought you would be in the seventh heaven of delight—as I am. Dan Brown is a dead man—"

"Have they found the body?"

"No, and never will. Those rocks chopped him into fish bait. But he's dead, no doubt of it. I saw him in the very midst of the rapids. We have got rid of a terrible danger in him!"

"Only to find a worse one in the tool we chose to send him to the devil!" snarled Gerux, viciously.

He choked down his anger sufficiently to give his fellow-conspirator a clear account of his interview with Sol Scott. Carmichael listened in grave silence, not speaking until the end.

"You think he spoke the truth about that paper?"

"Yes. He is not a man to forget anything. He is a devil, even more to be dreaded than Dan Brown was!"

"No, because Dan Brown was an honest man, on whom we could get no such hold as Sol Scott has given us," coolly replied Carmichael. "He is as deep in the mud as we are in the mire, and cunning as he is, we can get the better of him."

"He wants to command the Owls. Good; he shall have the position. We will obey him faithfully, and soon gain his confidence. Sooner or later he will let out the truth. If we can secure that paper and destroy it, we are safe enough, for before he can suspect our purpose, or write another, there will be a terrible accident—and the Owls will have to elect another chief. You understand?" laughed the tall vagabond, meaningly.

"Yes, but you are counting without Sol Scott," moodily uttered Gerux. "I can't explain it, but somehow I feel as though that man was my evil genius. Suppose he is only playing a part? This may be a cunning scheme to entrap us all!"

"We will watch him too close for that. At the first shadow of treachery, Sol Scott will be ready for burial."

"That may not be so easy; but let it go. Say he is all right. He demands Dan Brown's wife as his prize—says the Owls must help him win her."

King Carmichael laughed softly.

"And that touches you in a tender spot! Natural enough, after all the trouble we have taken. But that can be managed, too. The Owls will perform his will. We will carry off the dainty madam, and you can win her gratitude by coming in as her bold rescuer—in your proper colors, of course, not as Paul Gerux. That will be as good a time as any for extinguishing friend Scott. I will arrange matters so that there can be no failure. We will be rid of a dangerous friend, and you can bear off the fair young widow in a blaze of glory."

"Fill your glass. Here's to the good health and short life of Sol Scott, otherwise Colonel Owlet!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CUNNING TRICK.

THREE days had passed away since the evening on which transpired the tragic encounter between Sol Scott and Dan Brown of Denver.

During that time, close and persistent search had been made for the body of the detective, but in vain, by men under the direct supervision of Enoch Dodge and Rachel Brown. Pale, but cold and outwardly composed, the young wife urged on the search, offering heavy rewards for the finding of her husband, dead or alive. But the search was unavailing, as nearly everybody knew it must be. The rapids and their cruel denizens rarely yielded up a victim.

It was early evening of the third day, when a startling message was conveyed to Rachel Brown by the porter.

A man was below who said he could give her tidings of her lost husband, but refused to say more until he was face to face with the lady herself. Would madam see him?

Rachel bowed in silence, as though fearing to trust her voice, but the negro understood her, and retiring, quickly returned with the persistent stranger.

Not a very prepossessing-looking fellow, roughly clad, heavily-bearded low-browed and evil-eyed. Unless nature flatly lied, a treacherous, unscrupulous rascal—so Rachel Brown decided after a keen glance at his face.

"You have news for me, you say? Please state it," she said, motioning him to a chair, and seating herself.

The stranger grinned a little sheepishly as he twiddled his greasy hat between his fingers. Evidently he had not counted on such a frigidly calm reception. For a young widow, so recently bereaved in such a terrible manner, Mrs. Dan Brown was wonderfully composed.

"It's about Dan Brown, your husband, ma'am."

"You have found the body?" a quick flush coming to her cheeks; but this was the only sign of emotion he could detect.

"You reckon he was killed then?" asked the fellow, abruptly.

"There can no longer be a doubt of that. If alive, he would have returned to me long ere this," said Rachel, huskily.

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," grinned the rascal, adding quickly, as he saw a dangerous glitter leap into her eyes: "Ef you can't b'ar to hear the truth, ma'am, I'd better go. Thar's more'n one p'int 'bout Dan Brown, as even you never suspected. I kin give you some pesky qu'ar information, pervided you're willin' to pay me fer my trouble."

"If you have any information that is reliable, speak out. But I warn you that I shall sift it closely, and if you try to deceive me—if you are trumping up a lie in hopes of blackmailing—your pay will be lead, not gold."

As Rachel spoke, she drew a revolver from the table-drawer and placed it before her.

The man shifted uneasily on his seat, but declared:

"I kin prove what I say. But ef you don't want to hear it, I'll go to Sam Ellis. Mebbe he 'nd me kin make a trade."

"You have said too much not to say more. You don't leave this room now unless you make clean breast of it."

"How much'll you pay?" persisted the rascal, though it was clear that he by no means relished his present situation.

"All the information is worth."

"I'm willin' to trust to your honor, ef you'll sw'ar you'll pay me what it is wuth," he cried, eagerly.

"You have my promise; go on—and waste no more time than you can help," coldly uttered the woman.

"An' you won't git mad an' cut loose at me with that pepper-box, ef what I say don't jest suit ye?"

"No; if I think you are lying, I'll simply hand you over to my friend, Mr. Enoch Dodge. Go on—once more."

"Mebbe you knowed that Dan Brown o' Denver, as he calls himself, was r'ally head chief o' the Owls—"

"No; nor you either!" sharply interrupted Rachel.

"You axed me to tell what I knowed, an' yit when I try to, you won't let me," surlily growled the man.

"Because you are foully slandering the dead—"

"Mebbe he ain't as dead as 'you think fer!" grinned the low-browed rascal, once more reassured.

Rachel started convulsively—then closed her lips firmly as though to smother the words that rose in her throat. For a few moments she struggled with deep emotion; but when she spoke, her voice was clear and firm.

"Go on; but don't forget my warning. What you say will have to be paid for."

"Jest so you pay me what it's wuth, I'm satisfied, ma'am," and the fellow chuckled contentedly. "But as I was sayin' when you put in ahead o' me, Dan Brown was the head o' the Owls, Major Owlet, we called him—fer I own up I was one o' the gang."

"It was him that robbed old Rolfe's bank an' killed the young feller. I was one o' the six men as kerried off the bullion from the vault."

"You think I'm lyin'—I kin see that in your two eyes; but afore I'm done, mebbe you'll change your notion."

"You know what happened when the boss hed that fight with Sol Scott; the fust part of it, any way. The boss was hit, the blue pill jist scrapin' his temple an' makin' him a bit dizzy, like. He staggered ag'inst the rail, an' then fell over—but he did it on purpose!"

"Go on," uttered Rachel, coldly, as the fellow paused as though to give her a chance to question him.

"I can't sw'ar to why he did it, though mebbe I could give a guess not so wide o' the truth. Enough fer now that he did it, on the upper side o' the bridge. He struck the water, deep a plenty thar, an' swum to bank in the shadders, creepin' up an' hidin' under the timbers, while the crowd thought he was floatin' down to the riffles. Some said they see him bobbin' 'round 'mong the rocks, but they either lied or was mistook. An' while they was huntin' fer him down thar, Dan Brown stole away to whar his wife was waitin' for him—"

"Liar! I am his wife, and I have not seen him—"

"Leastways to a woman that he calls wife," doggedly added the stranger. "Whether the parson ever tied 'em together I can't say, but I've hearn 'em call each other husban' an' wife, an' I know they've bin livin' together as sich—that they be livin' together now—"

"You said you could prove your words," interrupted Rachel, her face flushed, her eyes glowing. "Prove them now, and name your own reward, even though it be my whole fortune—but if you are lying, I swear I will kill you like a dog!"

"If I take you to whar you kin see him, won't that do?" ventured the rascal, keeping one eye warily on the pistol so tightly gripped by those slender, white fingers. "You'll be satisfied to look on an' yit lay low? Fer the boss mought knock my hopes o' pay higher 'n a kite ef he ketches sight o' you an' saw you'd found him out."

"I promise anything—only take me to this cabin—to where you say my husband is alive—with another woman. If you lie, I'll kill you—if you speak the truth, I'll kill him and her, both!"

"It's a whack, ma'am!" and the rough-looking customer brought his horny palm down upon his knee with an emphatic slap that sent out an unsavory cloud of dust. "All I keef fer is a big enough stake to let me cl'ar out o' these onhealthy diggin's an' go somewhar whar I kin live like a gen'leman. The boss is big enough an' old enough to take keef o' his own self—ef he gits eternally salivated long o' foolin' with two women-critters all to onc't, 'tain't my fault now is it?"

Rachel paid no attention to the question, but remained with her head bowed upon her hand for full a minute—long enough for the dirty rascal to grow uneasy lest, after all, the golden prize was about to elude his grasp.

Then Rachel looked up, her face pale but wearing a look of stern determination.

"You may be playing me false, but I will run the risk. Go now, and wait for me outside. When I come down the steps, lead the way you wish me to follow."

"No tricks?" demanded the fellow, shrewdly. "You ain't sendin' me ahead so you kin putt old Dodge or somebody else onto the trail? For ef that's your game, I tell ye plain it won't work. Ef anybody follers you, as you foller me, it'll be a wild-goose chase fer us all."

"You have my word that I will not breathe my purpose to a single soul. Go—or I will begin to suspect you of treachery and double-dealing," sharply said Rachel.

Abashed, the traitor—to her or else to his master—left the room and hotel, lurking in the shadows beyond until the detective's wife should make her appearance.

His patience was not severely tried. Apparently Rachel Brown was quite as anxious to learn the bitter truth as he was to reveal it.

As she descended the steps, closely veiled and wrapped in a long cloak, the fellow showed himself, and then moved on in obedience to a slight wave of her hand.

No one who saw them passing through the streets would have dreamed of connecting their movements. The miner slouched along with

never a glance behind him. The dark, veiled figure glided silently forward, looking neither to the right nor the left, blindly rushing upon—what?

The busier portions of Golconda were quickly left behind them, and lower end of the valley reached. Then the low-browed guide paused and pointed up the hillside, where a faint light now glowed through the shadows of evening.

"Thar's the place, ma'am. In that cabin the woman lives that calls Dan Brown her husband. Mebbe he's thar now—but ef he ain't he will be soon. I hearn him tell her he would come this evenin'."

"Lead the way—quick!" huskily breathed the woman.

"The path is plain—you kin foller it easy. As far me, I don't go no funder," doggedly responded the fellow. "I think a powerful sight o' money, but I think still more o' my life. Dan Brown would shoot fust an' ax questions arterward, if he should lay eyes onto me."

"Coward!" exclaimed Rachel, strong contempt in her voice. "Wait here for me, then."

As she spoke, she hastened up the steep trail leading to the lone cabin, proceeding more cautiously as she drew near, then pausing abruptly as the subdued sound of a voice came to her ears—the voice of Dan Brown, the Denver detective!

Only for a moment did she hesitate. The red light came through the half-open door. She sprang forward, thrust the rickety barrier open and crossed the threshold.

A man ceased speaking and wheeled quickly as she entered. A man, but not Dan Brown. She stood face to face with Sol Scott, the mysterious miner!

There were two other men in the room, but she did not notice them. From behind her came a low, grating laugh—from the lips of the cunning rascal who had decoyed her hither—and Rachel Brown knew that she was entrapped.

"A thousand thanks, fair lady, for your kindness in granting me this interview!" exclaimed Sol Scott, with a profound bow, then stepping forward as though to clasp her in his arms.

"Back! contemptible villain!" cried Rachel, her right hand claspings a leveled revolver. "You murdered Dan Brown—thus does his widow avenge him!"

As she spoke, her finger contracted and the hammer fell!

CHAPTER XXV.

A DOUBLE BLOW.

SOL SCOTT never flinched from before the leveled weapon, though it bore full upon his brain. Instead a reckless laugh bubbled from his lips as his big blue eyes boldly met the gaze of the entrapped woman.

In desperation she pulled the trigger. The hammer fell, but no report followed, and Sol Scott was once more preserved from what appeared certain death.

Rachel uttered a cry of baffled rage, but before she could again cock the faithless weapon, it was wrested from her hand and she herself clasped firmly to the breast of the tall miner.

"You are helpless, my precious one, and may as well yield gracefully to the inevitable. Be wise, and you shall be treated courteously. If not—our lives are too valuable to society to be sacrificed to a woman's idle whims."

Rachel, desperate, as she struggled to free herself, felt her hand touch the hilt of a knife at the waist of her captor. She grasped the weapon and snatched it forth from its sheath, but her very eagerness to be avenged upon the traitor frustrated her last hope.

The weapon slipped from her grasp and flew half-way across the room, quivering as it stuck up in the floor.

Again Sol Scott laughed, but there was a trace of anger in the tones that chilled the desperate woman's blood.

"Blame yourself, not me, lady!" he grated, as he dexterously slipped a pair of handcuffs upon her wrists as he forced her arms behind her. "I would have treated you as the lady-love of Colonel Owlet should be served, but you would not have it so. Open your pretty lips—so!"

With wonderful ease and dexterity, Colonel Owlet, as Sol Scott now proclaimed himself, slipped a gag between Rachel Brown's teeth, securing it firmly in place.

"You need wear that ornament only until we get so far away from town that no curious ears can hear your gentle voice, my precious," laughed the miner. "I am only beginning to realize how dear life can be, when one has such a glorious bundle of beauty to live for."

"Lead the way to the horses, boys," he added, more sharply. "There's a neat stroke of work awaiting us to-night—one that will pan out better for you than kidnapping."

Half-leading, half-carrying his captive, Sol Scott followed his men over the ridge to a narrow trail where horses were waiting the party. Mounting, he raised Rachel in his arms and then, like grim phantoms of the night, they sped through the rocky waste, heading for the hidden stronghold of the Owls.

Less than an hour carried them thither, and entering the "judgment hall," where the remainder of the outlaws were congregated, Sol Scott lowered the helpless captive to the rocky floor, casting a swift glance around him.

The men before him were all masked, the dim, red lights upon the small table only serving to render the scene all the more fantastic.

"Gentlemen," rung out the clear voice of the tall miner. "I promised you a double treat to-night, and I mean to make my word good. This fair lady, as some of you may be aware, was once the wife of Dan Brown of Denver—now his widow. I have brought her here, to be our queen. And she is to play a prominent part in one of the surprises I promised you. In plain words, we will have a genuine wedding here to-night, when Mrs. Dan Brown will be transformed into Mrs. Colonel Owlet!"

A faint cheer followed this announcement. Evidently the Owls were not going crazy with joy over that portion of the evening's treat!

Colonel Owlet showed his white teeth in a mocking smile, then resumed:

"But business comes before pleasure, always. The bridal feast must give place to the other treat."

"When I consented to take command of this honorable order, I informed you that I had scent of a veritable bonanza. That I spoke no more than the truth, this night shall prove."

"Edward P. Rolfe has determined to open his bank again, and he has seventy-five thousand dollars in greenbacks now on the road from Denver. Gentlemen, we can bag that bundle of wealth without firing a shot, if you care to do so."

There was nothing half-way about the cheer that echoed through the cavern now. The marriage of their chief and the consequent installation of a beautiful queen of the Owls, was all very well in its way, and no doubt all-important in the estimation of the expectant bridegroom, but it could not appeal to the pockets of the mass in general as did this vision of many crisp greenbacks!

"Your lungs are not affected, after all, as I feared from your former cheer," laughed Colonel Owlet, sarcastically. "Never mind. A man's own money is better than another man's wife. But we have no time to lose. A dozen of you get your horses ready, while I place your future queen in a place of security."

Raising Rachel Brown in his arms, Sol Scott strode toward the rear of the cave, seeming thoroughly familiar with his surroundings, though they were now in almost perfect darkness.

Presently pausing, he gently deposited his helpless burden upon a pile of blankets, then struck a match and lighted a rude oil lamp.

"Now, lady," he said, turning to his captive, "I must leave you for a short time. While I am gone, weigh your situation well; and when I return, meet me with a smile, like a sensible woman. Bury the past. Live only for the future—and your humble slave!"

Stooping, he removed the gag from her jaws, then pressed his lips ardently to hers, arising and retreating quickly as though he feared a passionate outburst on her part.

Brief as had been his absence, Sol Scott found the number of men he mentioned in readiness for the night ride, and he showed his white teeth in an approving smile.

"Look to your weapons and see that they are in serviceable condition, though it is not likely you will have occasion to use them to-night. Old Rolfe is trusting to cunning rather than force to get his wealth through all right, without paying toll to the Owls."

Each one of the selected men advanced to the table and examined his pistols, then fell back again.

Sol Scott, satisfied that all was in order, led the way to their horses, and mounting rode rapidly away from the stronghold, just as the moon was peeping over the Eastern hills.

At a reckless, breakneck pace he led them through the frowning masses of rock along the narrow trail, not drawing rein until close upon the road that led to the valley where nestled Golconda, striking it at a point several miles below the town.

"Hark!" he exclaimed, only a few minutes after their ambush was prepared. "We are none too soon!"

From the distance came the rumbling of heavy wheels, accompanied every now and then by the sharp crack of a black-snake whip, the sounds steadily drawing nearer.

"Mind, now," cautioned Sol Scott. "If there is to be any powder burnt, I'll set it off. The man that goes against my orders will never do so a second time."

His covert threat was understood. Little danger of any Owl in his sober senses going contrary to such a tough customer as Sol Scott had shown himself!

Still they were far from being satisfied, for even the less experienced could tell that yonder sounds came not from regular coach nor special, but rather a heavy mule team, doubtless carrying freight to some of the merchants of Golconda. Could their new chief have made such

a mistake? Was it a mistake? Was there not a cunning trap underlying this?

Treacherous themselves, and hence always ready to suspect treachery in others, the Owls held themselves in readiness to flee should their new-born fears prove founded on fact, but each one inwardly vowing to send one bullet at least in quest of the traitor's heart.

If Sol Scott suspected aught of this, he gave no sign. Like some grim statue he sat his horse, his keen eyes fixed upon the point where their anticipated game now put in an appearance—a four-mule team loaded with freight, as the disgusted Owls had surmised.

There was only one man visible, and he bestrode his near wheeler, plying whip with melodious cracks.

"Halt! and throw up your hands, stranger!" cried Sol Scott, as the team reached the moonlighted spot directly before their ambush.

"Hands up it air!" promptly responded the teamster, first jerkin' up his mules, then raising both hands above his head. "But hain't you a leetle out o' your reckonin', boss?" he added, as Sol Scott rode out into the moonlight, thus revealing his fantastic head-dress, worn as Colonel Owlet. "This ain't no stage-coach or express cart. Only groceries, dry an' wet, fer Golconda."

"Exactly," coolly responded Colonel Owlet, making a signal, in obedience to which his men instantly surrounded the teamster. "You can't tell us anything about your freight that we don't know already, even to that precious sack of beans! When you get to Golconda, tell old Rolfe from me that he showed very little judgment in selecting such a hiding-place for his treasure. Colonel Owlet is a Bostonian, and his nose naturally detects any attempted adulteration of his favorite beans, cooked or uncooked."

The Owls stared at the chief while these curious words rolled trippingly off his tongue, wondering whether he was not seriously "cracked," but the mule-driver only too readily comprehended his meaning.

"I told the durned old fool somethin' crooked would turn up afore I got the pesky stuff into Golconda!" he uttered in supreme disgust.

"Then he can't blame you, of course," laughed Sol Scott. "Boys, the rest of you climb in that wagon and pitch out the freight until you find a bag of white navy beans; bag marked with letter R."

"Cain't be he was fool enough—" began an Owl.

"Nor are you fool enough to argue when I command," sternly cried the new chief—clearly a genuine Tartar.

In a few moments the marked sack was found and Colonel Owlet ripped it open with his knife, spilling the white beans in a snowy shower until a heavy, square package was revealed, carefully tied and sealed.

"Seventy-five thousand dollars!" laughed Colonel Owlet, holding the package aloft, so all could see it. "Not bad wages for a few minutes' work. Sorry for you, mate," to the teamster, "but old Rolfe is in his second childhood and I am his appointed guardian."

"You've done all the mischief you kin; now I kin go, I s'pose?" sullenly demanded the driver.

"I'd rather you remained here until morning, or some one chances along to help you reload. You might injure your breath by heavy lifting," laughed Colonel Owlet.

By his direction the man was bound hand and foot and placed into the wagon. Then the mules were unhitched and tied to the wheels.

This done, in order to keep the news of the robbery from reaching Golconda too soon, the Owls rode rapidly away through the night, Sol Scott bearing the package of greenbacks before him, on the pommel of his saddle.

Steadily they rode on until at length the stronghold of the Owls was gained, where their return was greeted with loud cheers by their comrades there assembled.

Colonel Owlet placed the precious package upon the little table before alluded to, then said:

"Gentlemen, though not yet your queen, it is meet that our future lady should be a witness of the manner in which our labors are repaid. I will bring her; wait."

He glided away to the cell where he had left Rachel Brown, but a cry of astonishment burst from his lips as he saw that it was empty!

For a moment he stood as though petrified, then turned and dashed back to the judgment hall, a terrible light flashing in his big blue eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PLAYING A BOLD GAME.

WHILE there were none among the Owl-heads who went into ecstasies over Sol Scott's announcement of his intended marriage with the widow of Dan Brown, there was one present to whom those words were bitter as gall, and only that he knew vengeance would follow swift and sure on the heels of such a deed, Paul Gerux would have sent a pistol bullet through the brain of the newly elected chief ere that speech was cold upon his lips. But he was

used to dissembling, and smothered his rage, biding his time.

Neither Paul Gerux nor King Carmichael were among the volunteers for that night ride, though the latter worthy, after searching vainly for his friend among those remaining, came to the conclusion that the Frenchman had attended Colonel Owlet, for some reasons of his own.

This was exactly what Gerux intended he should think. He had resolved on a bold stroke, to which he knew Carmichael would object, lest, in his rage at being outwitted, Sol Scott should expose all their dark secrets to the officers of the law, as he had once threatened.

"I've run too much risk—stained my hands and soul too deeply, to falter now," were the reflections that shaped themselves in the busy brain of the cunning schemer as he crept noiselessly through the gloom to the cell where Colonel Owlet had left Rachel Brown.

For many long months he had been trying to devise some plan by which he might obtain complete possession of this gloriously beautiful woman and her large fortune. It was his hand that finally put all this cunning machinery in motion, and now, just when his long coveted reward seemed almost within his grasp, this audacious fire-eater stepped in between them, claiming the prize himself.

"His bridal couch shall be a grave, curse him!" snarled Gerux beneath his breath. "I can brand him as the chief of the Owls. Even if that paper should be produced, who would believe it, against my oath? Bah! cunning as you think yourself, Sol Scott, you are no match for me!"

He paused for a moment at a narrow niche from which he took several articles, then crept on until he reached the rock chamber where Rachel Brown still lay as Sol Scott had left her, dimly outlined by the dull light above.

"Be cautious, lady!" softly breathed Paul Gerux. "I am a friend, come to rescue you. Be cautious—a single word above your breath might reach the ears of our enemies, and surely doom me to death!"

Rachel Brown now gave evidence of remarkable nerve, slowly rising to a sitting posture without sound, though the words of her visitor must have thrilled her with strong emotion.

"Who and what are you?" she demanded, softly, as Paul Gerux stole forward within the dim circle of light.

"A friend, lady, risking his life in your behalf," he replied.

"How came you here, then, if you are an honest man? If I wrong you, pardon me. But once this night I have been foully betrayed by one in whom I placed my trust. How am I to know that you are not acting from some similar motive?"

"Can any fate be worse than that which threatens you?" he asked, in guarded tones through his feathered head-dress. "Colonel Owlet, whom you know as Sol Scott, only a few minutes since, declared to his men that this night they should rejoice over the bridal of their chief—that on his return from a brief plundering expedition, you should become his bride. How, you can guess, when you reflect what place this is, and how unlikely it is that either priest or justice can be found to legally unite you. And even were such at hand, the blood of your husband lies on that demon's soul! Would you suffer this?"

"I can die," slowly uttered the woman, her face pale, but her voice calm and steady as fate.

"Better live, if only to avenge the death of Dan Brown."

"Gladly would I escape, if I could; but that is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. Listen, lady. I was a witness of your capture this evening—"

"And suffered that villain to triumph, when by one word, one bold deed, you might have foiled him?" exclaimed Rachel.

"I am here to make amends, if I erred," coldly resumed the disguised Frenchman. "I am a detective, sent here on purpose to discover the secrets of the Owls. I might possibly have rescued you then, but I preferred to follow on and learn more before I struck. I did so. I now know where the outlaws rendezvous, and if you will trust me, we can leave this, reach Golconda and raise force sufficient to surprise and capture the entire band."

"Those men would never suffer me to pass—"

"I have provided for that," and as he spoke, Gerux unrolled the bundle he bore, displaying a long cloak and an owl's-head mask, similar to the disguise worn by himself. "The fellow who once wore these, will never need them again. He was on guard near the entrance. I stole upon him, and when I passed by his post, he lay in the bushes, quiet enough."

"You killed him?" asked Rachel, shuddering slightly.

"It was his death, or your continued captivity in the hands of the man who killed your husband—my friend."

"Who are you? Surely I have heard your voice before?"

For answer the man removed his feathered mask.

"Paul Gerux!" exclaimed Rachel, yet in guarded tones.

"Paul Gerux since my arrival in Golconda; before that—see!" and as he spoke the heavy black beard came off in his hand. "Wash away this dye, and I am Dan Farrar."

Rachel knew him now, and with difficulty choked back a cry of amazement. Dan Farrar was an official high in the police circles of Denver; to all seeming an ardent friend to herself and husband. Surely she could trust him.

"You are satisfied?" he asked, replacing his disguises.

"Yes. I will go with you, if you think we can escape."

"By donning these things, I know we can. Let me unlock those handcuffs—so. Now I'll put out this light. Some of those rascals may take a notion to steal over here for a surreptitious peep at their promised queen."

As he spoke, Dan Farrar—Paul Gerux no longer—arose and extinguished the dull light.

"Arrange your disguise, while I make sure that there is no one spying upon us," he added, drawing a knife and gliding away through the darkness.

Rachel did as she was bidden, placing the owl-mask upon her head, and folding the long cloak around her. Even in the broad light of day she might have passed without her sex being suspected. In the darkness—for even in the judgment hall, only the center of the room was lighted clearly by the skull-lamps—there was scarcely a chance of suspicion being aroused by her passage unless some one of the Owls had been eavesdropping there.

In a few moments Dan Farrar returned.

"So far as I can discover, my movements have not been noticed, or suspected," he said in guarded tones as he touched her hand. "In ten minutes more we will be in safety, if no unfortunate accident occurs."

"If it should—if by any chance we are discovered—leave me to my fate and secure your own escape," breathed Rachel.

"Can you think that of me?" and there was intense passion—the passion of a fiery love—in his voice as he spoke. "No—I will rescue you, or die in defending your honor!"

"Let us hope there will be no such necessity," responded Rachel, and the keen ear of Dan Farrar detected a coldness not there when she spoke before.

Inwardly cursing himself for being so impulsive, alarming her before the time was ripe for plucking the dainty fruit he had sworn should be his at any cost, he said:

"We will go now. Guide yourself by my cloak, and do not release it until I touch your hand. Then wait until I am out of sight. Count fifty, then follow in my tracks. If any one should offer to stop you, I will come to your rescue at once. You understand?"

"Perfectly. Lead on and I will follow."

Dan Farrar led the way until near the circle of light cast around by the skull-lamps, then reached behind him and touched Rachel's hand where it clasped his cloak.

He felt her grasp relax, and moved slowly forward, unnoticed by the Owls scattered around, though his course led him close by several. At this point he paused for a moment, uttering some careless remark, then moved on.

Rachel watched him until he disappeared, then after a brief period, followed in his tracks.

Thanks to the gloom and the disguise she wore, the task was an easier one than she had dared hope.

No one appeared to notice her, or if they did, none addressed her, doubtless taking her for what she seemed, as good an Owl as the best of them.

"Safe, so far—follow me as before," breathed a low voice, as Dan Farrar joined her in the darkness around the bend in the gradually contracting passage. "We are almost out of the den—and then we will be safe!"

A few rods more, then they emerged from the hollow bill into the bright moonlight.

"Quick! there are no guards now, but some of the rascals may chance to come out, and if we are discovered, it will result in a fight for life!"

Dan Farrar was terribly in earnest. He was playing a bold game where defeat meant death.

He led the way rapidly, diverging from the rocky trail usually followed by the Owls, only breathing freely when huge piles of fantastically-shaped rocks rose between them and the secret stronghold.

"Safe at last!" he almost gasped, so intense was his relief—not on his own account, for few men possessed more animal courage than he did, but because he now felt that the glorious prize for which he had plotted and sinned so deeply, was at last wholly his own.

An equally complete change also came over Rachel Brown.

Until now she had followed him without a question or exhibiting the least hesitation. One would have said that she placed the most implicit confidence in the man who had so adroitly rescued her from the power of Colonel Owlet. But now—she drew away from him and refused his extended hand with a gesture that seemed born of deepest aversion.

"You refuse my hand—why?" asked the man, in surprise.

"Because my eyes are open at last," she responded, her voice ringing out clear and scornful.

"What do you mean? Are you going crazy?"

"I mean that I know you at last. That I know your whole life, so far as it concerned me and mine, in the past, must have been a lie black as Hades itself!"

Dan Farrar stared at the speaker, hardly able to believe his ears. What could have produced this wonderful alteration? What discoveries could she possibly have made since leaving the judgment hall of the Owls?

Before he could answer his mental questions, or recover from the surprise her bitter words threw him into, Rachel added, her voice full of scorn and contempt:

"You pretended to be a friend to my husband and me. You succeeded in imposing upon him, but I never liked you. Instinct told me your heart was black and corrupt at the core. I saw what my husband did not see: that you envied him his wife and her fortune—but I, even I! did not dream to what depths of infamy you could descend in your vile plottings—"

"Rachel Brown, are you mad? What do you mean?" he hoarsely uttered, advancing as if to grasp her.

"Back! or by the moon above! I will kill you!" she cried, facing him with a cocked revolver. "I know you, Ezra Drake! Ha! that touches you to the quick!" she laughed, contemptuously, as he started as though stung.

"You know too much!" he snarled, wickedly, leaping forward and catching the revolver so that the hammer fell upon his palm. "You have sealed your fate by those words. I would have conducted you safely to Golconda, content to woo and win you as a true lover should, but now I will use other means. You never leave these wilds until you go as my wife—"

"Don't be too sure of that, mate!" cried a voice that rung through his brain like a veritable death-knell—the voice of Dan Brown of Denver!

Like a flash he wheeled, but too late to defend himself. A hard fist shot out, and Dan Farrar was lifted from his feet and hurled headlong a dozen feet away!

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TRANSFORMATION SCENE.

THE Owls heard the wondering cry that burst from the lips of Colonel Owlet when he discovered the fact that Rachel Brown no longer occupied the little stone cell where he had left her, bound, handcuffed and helpless. They saw him rush back to the judgment hall, glare around him for a moment, then hasten along the passage leading to the outer world. Wondering, they followed after him, but pausing abruptly as he confronted them ere they could reach the entrance.

"Back!" and the command came hoarsely from the curved beak of the owl-mask. "The man who tries to pass me now, dies like a dog!"

A brace of revolvers filled his hands, their dark muzzles covering the nearest Owls. Sparks of living fire seemed to shoot forth from the eyelet-holes of his feathered head-dress. One man confronting a score and a half, and those thirty flinched before him.

"There has been foul treachery during my absence," continued Colonel Owlet, speaking with a little more composure. "Some among you must be guilty, and I mean to find out that one, and deal unto him the punishment prescribed by the laws that govern us.

"Fall back to the judgment hall, gentlemen. The man that dares hesitate exposes himself, for those who are innocent have nothing to fear."

"Obey, my children!" boomed the deep notes of King Carmichael as Major Owlet. "A traitor among us is as dangerous as a blazing torch in a powder magazine. Fall back, and each man be a guard upon his fellows. If any attempt to steal away in the gloom, arrest them, though you have to do it with bullet or steel!"

What little doubts the Owls might have felt about obeying, were smothered by this speech from their old leader, and in silence they retreated to the judgment hall where one more strange scene was to take place.

Colonel Owlet stood beside the little table on which burned the skull lamps with a ghastly red light. Before him were huddled the owl-headed outlaws, for the most part bewildered and even awe-stricken.

"Brothers," at length spoke their chief, raising his hands and removing his fantastic head-dress, tossing it aside, together with his cloak, "until this matter is settled, I am no longer Colonel Owlet, but simple Sol Scott, a brother who accuses some one or more among the family of foully betraying his or their trust."

"As accuser, name first the crime, then those whom you suspect or know to be guilty of treachery," said Major Owlet, from among the somber crowd.

"Three hours ago, I left here a woman, her hands in handcuffs behind her back, her ankles firmly bound. I depart on duty that results

in placing seventy-five thousand dollars in the treasury. While I am thus engaged, laboring for the benefit of the whole family, some one or more of that family is dealing me a bitter, treacherous blow in the back!

"I return. I seek my captive, your future queen, but she is not where I left her. The handcuffs are unlocked, the cords cut, the lady gone!"

"This could not have been done without the aid of at least one traitor. And now I demand his punishment, according to the laws of the family!"

While this charge was being made, the brain of King Carmichael was busy. He knew now why he had failed to find Paul Gerux. That worthy was boldly retrieving the march their new chief had stolen upon them both. For, until Sol Scott made his appearance in the stronghold with Rachel Brown a captive that evening, neither of them even suspected his purpose was to be carried out so soon.

"Let him find out the truth—let dog eat dog!" were the reflections that busied Major Owlet's brain while Sol Scott was speaking. "Whichever way the fight between them turns out, I can hardly be the loser. Gerux knows too much. He could slip the noose over my head whenever the notion took him. So with Sol Scott. Let them come together, and may the devil aid them each to kill the other!"

Thus mentally, then aloud:

"If the charge can be fixed upon any person belonging to the family, he shall be tried for his life. If proved guilty, you have the right to fix his punishment. Am I right, brothers?"

A deep murmur of assent ran through the crowd.

"The lady could only have escaped through this hall of judgment. Did any one observe her passage?"

Again that murmur, now of negation.

"You hear, brother?" asked Major Owlet, turning toward the accuser. "All declare their innocence, since they swear none of them has seen aught of the missing lady."

"So foul a traitor would hardly balk at a lie," sneered Sol Scott, his white teeth gleaming through his tawny beard. "But I have not the slightest idea that the criminal is here. Of course he fled with the lady, and by this time may be near Golconda, no doubt hastening to cheat the law in his own case by betraying us all to Sam Ellis and his blood-hounds!"

Exclamations of alarm came from the Owls. This was a new and terribly serious phase of the affair which, strangely enough, had not until then struck them.

"Silence and order!" sternly cried Sol Scott, raising his hand. "Not a man shall leave this hall until we all know who the traitor or traitors are.

"The entire family was present to-night; therefore, if any are missing now, he or they must be the criminals. As the shortest method of finding this out, you will one by one advance to this table, place your weapons upon it, then remove your mask so all can see your faces. Then, that there may be no double dealing, those who have passed the ordeal will stand to one side, apart from the rest. Major Owlet, have I spoken well?"

"I can see no objection to your plan," slowly observed King Carmichael, yet feeling a strange uneasiness which he was ashamed to confess, even to himself. "As an example of obedience for the rest, here goes."

He unbuckled his belt and placed it upon the table before Sol Scott, then removed his feathered mask, letting the red light fall full upon his face.

"I thank you, brother," said Sol Scott, gravely. "Fall back to the right. The others will please advance, one by one, beginning with the left hand brother. Come!"

One by one the Owls moved forward, piling their weapons upon the table, then baring their faces to the light for a few moments, until Sol Scott motioned them to retire and range themselves alongside Major Owlet. And thus the curious scene lasted until every man present had passed through the ceremony.

"Brothers," said Sol Scott, after a deep, breathless silence of a few moments, "two of the family are missing. Can you name them?"

"Paul Gerux and Old Peacock!" came the answer as if from one man.

"And they are the traitors! What is the doom decreed for such treachery?"

"Death!" came the united response.

A brief silence, so profound that one could almost hear one's heart beat—then came a most astonishing move on the part of Sol Scott.

He grasped the weapon-laden table, raised it clear of the floor and hurled it with all its contents down into the black abyss from whose depths arose the hot steam of the boilingsprings far below!

Yells of angry amazement burst from the Owls, but high above them rung out the voice of Sol Scott:

"Stir a step—lift a hand, and you die!"

Even as he spoke, the intense darkness was dispelled by a broad wave of brilliant light from near the spot where the passage opened into the judgment hall. This light streamed from half

a dozen dark lanterns whose slides had been suddenly opened, and as the Owls stared in blinking dismay, they heard many significant double clicks, telling of fire-arms being cocked, ready for use.

Before them, with a ready revolver in each hand, stood the man to whom this terrible surprise was due—no longer Sol Scott, for at his feet lay the blonde beard and wig—but Dan Brown of Denver!

And as they stared in stupefied amazement, another dark lantern was opened several yards to the rear of the others, its brilliant stream of light being moved slowly from the right to the left, thus disclosing a close rank of men whose leveled revolvers covered the outlaws. And prominent among them were recognized Sam Ellis and Enoch Dodge!

"Betrayed!" snarled King Carmichael, crouching low down, then leaping forward like a wild beast, straight at the throat of the daring Denver detective.

As his feet touched the rocky floor, a jet of flame issued from Dan Brown's revolver, and Major Owlet fell backward without cry or groan.

"Beware!" thundered the detective, "Throw up your hands and surrender. The man who dares hesitate shall share the fate of that fallen cur!"

What could they do? Unarmed, covered by a full score of ready pistols, the only avenue of escape to the outer world blockaded by the men holding those weapons.

Though they knew that almost certain death awaited them when brought before the bar of outraged justice, their hands went up above their heads as though all were impelled by the same spring.

"Send in two men with the handcuffs, Ellis," ordered Dan Brown. "Manacle them in pairs. Keep them covered, and if any one ventures to resist, load him full of bullets!"

Two men advanced, bearing each a bundle of clinking handcuffs which they dexterously snapped in place, fettering the right hand of one outlaw to the left wrist of his comrade.

"A glorious victory, old man, and I congratulate you on the perfect success of your bold ruse!" cried Ellis, advancing and clasping the hand of the Denver detective. "Only I am sorry you were forced to kill that fellow—"

"I only 'creased' the rascal," laughed Dan Brown, as he stooped over the fallen Major Owlet. "He knows too much for me to still his tongue in death. See!"

At the word he twitched at the sandy beard which came off in his hand, revealing a face so marvelously like his own, that Sam Ellis started back with a cry of surprise, almost awe.

"Do you wonder now that Rolfe mistook me for that midnight assassin?" laughed Dan Brown. "King Carmichael, as you have known him, dealt that blow, and it was to insure his capture, not death, that I arranged this little surprise party."

"Yet he must have cleared you—it was he who came to us that night and proved you innocent—"

"Not exactly," laughed Dan Brown. "To my wife belongs the credit of originating that bold ruse, and a faithful friend carried out her idea to perfection. But I'll explain everything to you in good time."

Sam Ellis stood amazed. He wondered if his brain was becoming unsettled. No doubt had he been a hard drinking man he would have thought the "man with the poker" was just beginning to get in his work!

But Dan Brown was fated to be surprised nearly if not quite as completely as either Sam Ellis or the Owls.

A peculiar whistle came from the darkness beyond the lanterns, and recognizing the signal, the detective bade the men let the newcomers pass.

Rachel Brown glided forward and was warmly clasped to the breast of her husband.

Following her were two men, one tall, the other broad and short, both wearing owl-head masks. The former removed his mask, revealing a face strange, yet familiar to most of those present—the face of Sol Scott, clean shorn.

"Mr. Brown, I beg that you will exchange prisoners with me. I give you Dan Farrar, alias Paul Gerux; you give me King Carmichael as you know him—Fergus Randolph, as this warrant entitles him, the man who ten years ago assassinated General Watkyns Cowperthwait in New York city!"

Truly, this was a night of surprises all round!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THROUGH THE FOG.

So far as the general reader is concerned, this chronicle ended with the last chapter, but there are always a praiseworthy few who are not content unless every obscure or mystified point is made perfectly clear, in which desire I heartily uphold them; hence this supplemental chapter.

First, and most important, the man who has figured so prominently in these pages as "Sol Scott" was in reality a distant relative of the murdered General Watkyns Cowperthwait, who, after the long search for the assassin had

been abandoned by the detectives, took the trail and finally run the villain to earth. His only clue was an old photograph of the criminal, obtained from one of his confederates, who died in prison. This, like the original, bore a marvelous resemblance to Dan Brown of Denver, whom the amateur believed to be the criminal when they first met. He found him high in favor in Denver, and rightly fearing that he would not have a fair chance with him there, settled down in Golconda as a miner, finally sending the Rocky Mountain Detective Association word that the long-sought criminal was masquerading under the name of Sol Scott, at Golconda, asking that Dan Brown be sent to arrest him.

So cunning and perfect was the Denver detective's disguise as "Funny Felix from Frisco," that "Sol Scott" failed to recognize him until after he had rescued Rachel Brown from the clutch of Vernon Shadutz. To solve all doubts, he manufactured that affecting story of the man who killed the general, watching Dan Brown closely, and gradually becoming convinced that his suspicions were wrong, particularly after hearing the story Rachel told of "Dan Brown's Double."

Unluckily for the conspirators, their negro spy was called away before the two detectives came to a perfect understanding, else their ending might have been different.

Sol Scott did not confess his imposition, but made a league with Dan Brown to join him in hunting down the Owls, Brown promising to plead that service in extenuation, should Scott ever be brought to trial.

Then Sol Scott was approached by the conspirators as a suitable tool by means of which Dan Brown might be removed. Convinced that "Major Owlet" was in reality Dan Brown's double, and his game, he apparently consented.

The bank was robbed and Albus Black killed; this and the endeavor to throw the blame on Dan Brown being the plan hinted at by Paul Gerux, alias Dan Farrar.

It will be remembered that, while the prisoner was wondering who could this "double" be, a sudden idea struck him, but its utterance was cut short by the entrance of Sam Ellis announcing the death of young Black.

That idea was destined to bear important fruit. Just after his marriage with Rachel Trowbridge, Dan Brown was presented with a bust of himself, carved by a rising young sculptor. From this bust, Rachel made a mask of wax, perfect in every detail. And Dan Brown believed his "double" had by some means got hold of this mask.

After his rescue from the lynchers, he spoke to his wife about this mask, and learned that she had it in her luggage at the hotel. She consulted with Enoch Dodge and Sol Scott, the result being a neat little plot where Edward Rolfe and Sam Ellis were completely deceived, Sol Scott removing his carefully pasted-on beard, and playing the part of Dan Brown's Double, for the time being.

The duel between the two detectives was a "put up job," Dan Brown voluntarily leaping into the river, and escaping detection by the very means described by the decoy who led Rachel into what he supposed was a real trap, while Enoch Dodge drew the crowd down toward the rapids by his pretended glimpse of the body of his friend.

Then Dan Brown donned Sol Scott's disguise, and insisted on the conspirators making him chief of the Owls as they had promised.

The abduction of Rachel was a farce, intended to the more surely entrap the enemy. Sol Scott as Oil Peacock, a recruit vouched for by Colonel Owlet, was to watch over her, both feeling sure that Gerux, as they alone knew him, would not tamely give up the prize he had schemed so long and boldly for.

It was a genuine surprise to Rachel, when he revealed himself as Dan Farrar, but she played her part boldly, holding him at bay until Sol Scott, as Oil Peacock could come to the rescue.

The package of money was a fraud, the teamster being fully instructed, and the robbery being made simply to give Gerux time to steal away Rachel, and furnish a plausible pretext for disarming the Owls, thus insuring their capture without bloodshed.

How all turned out exactly in accordance with their carefully arranged plans, the reader has seen.

But little more need be said here, for, as the events detailed in these pages occurred only three years ago, there are few changes to record.

Sol Scott succeeded in taking King Carmichael, or, more properly, Fergus Randolph, to New York, the charge of murdering General Cowperthwait taking precedence over that of killing Albus Black, and he was duly arraigned for trial. There was no defense worth mentioning. The murder was proved to have been wholly unprovoked, arising from an old war feud, and the criminal was brought in guilty and sentenced to death.

His wife—a voluptuously beautiful woman, whom the reader once met as Rose Drake—came to him, and spent all the time with him that the

prison regulations would allow. And then, one morning the whole city was astounded by the notice that Fergus Randolph had escaped!

A devoted wife—plenty of money—a faithless jailer; that was the old, old story.

Dan Farrar proved almost as lucky. He was found guilty of aiding the robbery of Rolfe's bank, and despite his great influence in magisterial circles, was sentenced to State's prison for ten years.

Before he had served six months he managed to escape, just how, nobody appeared to know.

Enoch Dodge still serves Grenada as its mayor, and his big heart grows bigger every day.

Dan Brown and his wife still make their headquarters at Denver, and be sure, Rachel will never again doubt the truth and fidelity of her husband.

As soon as Fergus Randolph was sentenced to death, "Sol Scott" returned to Denver, where he and Dan Brown entered into partnership as detectives, "private or otherwise."

It is barely possible that we may again take up the pen to record their daring deeds, at some future time.

THE END.

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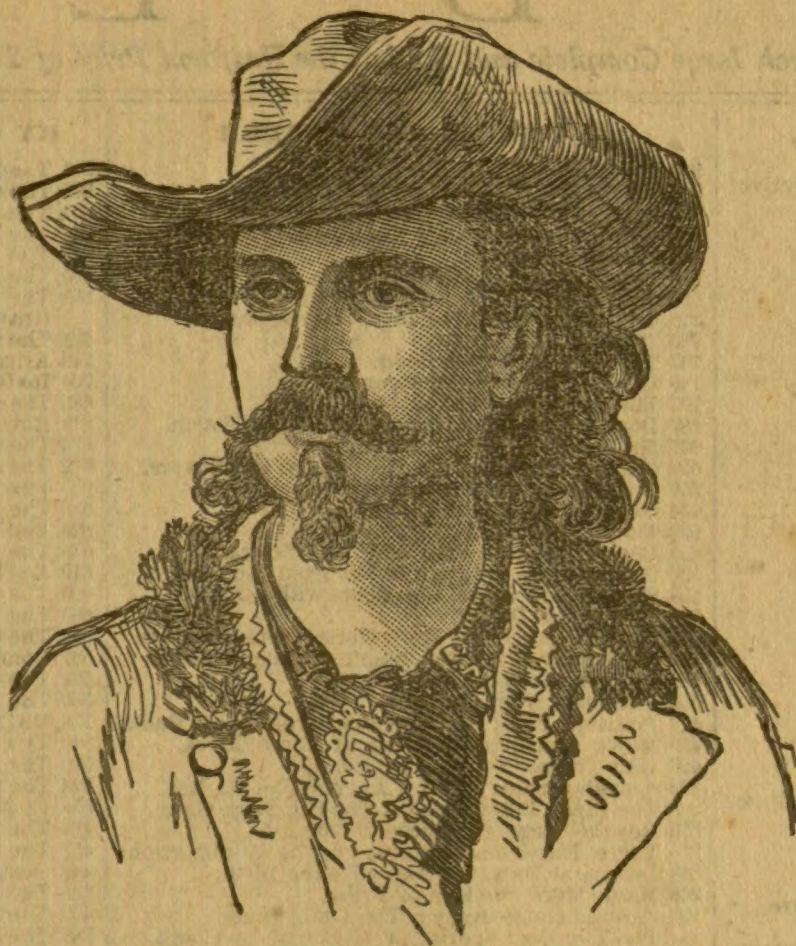
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